THE RIVER TRAIL

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The RIVERTRAIL

LAURIE Y. ERSKINE

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APPLETON

The RIVER.

By LAURIE YORK ERSKINE

Author of "Renfrew of the Royal Mounted".

A vigorous and absorbing tale of the Northwest is this novel, in which romance and adventure unfold in the great woods. Benjamin Ruggles, an old man, owns a tract of the Northern forest and regards it as his most precious possession. He and his daughter, Naomi, are threatened by a hidden menace when the broken adventurer, Ralph Gunlock, finds that there is oil on the Ruggles holding. By any means, fair or foul, this Gunlock decides to gain possession of the land. He imports gunmen to assist in his evil designs; but the presence of the ugly flock of villains arouses the suspicions of the Northwest Royal Mounted Police. William Geoffrian, a gentleman ranker in that organization, is deputed to investi-In the powerful sweep of the events which unfold the ultimate demands of the dangerous life of the wilderness face this Geoffrian, and there appears in him that bedrock of true character which is needed to face the villainy which rises about him like a tide, way off there on the outskirts of civilization. The picturesque settlers, trappers, remittance men, and commercial men of the forests, the heroic central character, and the beautiful girl, Naomi, all grip the reader's interest in this stirring story of adventure.

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THE RIVER TRAIL LAURIE YORK ERSKINE

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ROMANCE OF THE ROYAL MOUNTED

LAURIE YORK ERSKINE

AUTHOR OF "RENFREW OF THE ROYAL MOUNTED," ETC.

The river trail, which was to lead Geoffrian through doubts to fair fulfillment. The river trail, which was to be memorable for him as long as he had memory.



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THIS WORK IS DEDICATED TO

WALTER P. McGUIRE

WHO DISCOVERED THAT THE STORIES I WROTE WERE WORTH PRINTING, AND WHO ENCOURAGED ME TO DO MY BEST



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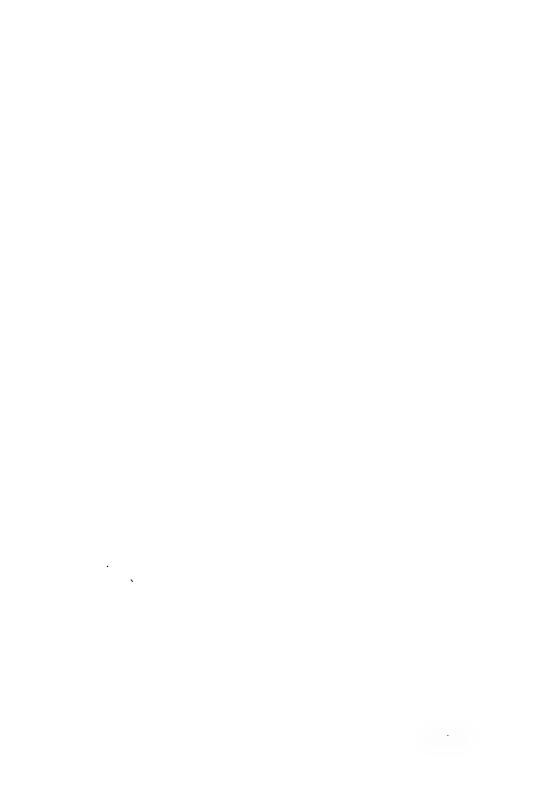
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CHAPTER I

GUNLOCK ACCEPTS FINALITY

The scene was a peaceful one. It was more than that, for the brightly painted beauty of the woods in late autumn, from which it derived that peace, glittered with the invigorating splendor of a perfect, unclouded day.

Two men had foregathered upon a knoll on the river bank that Ruggles called his "study." A sylvan spot with the bright, hard river passing silently below, and the enfoliated glory of the forest screening it; a moss-carpeted stage set with the beauty of the woods for this scene between them. And the men themselves seemed peaceable enough. Old Ruggles sat in dignity; a dignity accentuated by his great black beard, his apostolic mien, his shrewd, cloudy eyes, which glistened now with restrained turbulence. He sat on a rustic bench with the crude timber table of his own fashioning before him and listened patiently to Gunlock's postulations. And Gunlock, his massive body clad in cordurous that concealed no powerful contour of it, stood with his pillarlike legs apart and hands behind him, glowing with that vibrant effort of personality which it was his way to assume in such a situation. The forest was beautiful, the day perfect, and the men were good to look upona scene peaceful enough in all appearances; and yet it was a scene of conflict, containing the elements of tragedy. The smoldering beginnings of incredible events were there; violent death, which was to reach more than one who, in that instant, knew nothing of this meeting; and unimagined transitions for lives which in that instant were untroubled as a forest pool.

Benjamin Ruggles had stood before his store that morning and watched with grave displeasure the approach of the man, Gunlock. Gunlock, Ruggles felt, was becoming a nuisance. It was the custom of Ruggles to dismiss a subject with finality by the simple and autocratic device of letting it be known that he desired to hear no more of it. But Gunlock had not accepted finality; he had gazed impassively upon it, and denied its very existence. He was irritating in To Ruggles he was excessively irrisuch a matter. tating. Among the men with whom Ruggles had dealt, Gunlock was the only man whom he had seen deliberately snub his carefully acquired finality; and Ruggles decided that he must be harsh with him.

Gunlock had ridden up the roadway, which led to the Ruggles place from the river trail, and Ruggles had watched him as he disappeared behind the store building upon his great sable mare. The Ruggles place was situated some twelve miles from the settlement of Marbrek, which is north of Lost River, which is north of Prince Albert in Northern Saskatchewan. At his log home in the heart of his wide acres of forest land, the old man dispensed a lordly hospitality. Gunlock, he knew, would put up his mare, stop perhaps for a chat with Naomi, and then come striding through the store to persist in his obstinate attempt to strip Ruggles of his most cherished possession.

His most cherished possession. One would of course think first of Naomi. Yet it was not that. Ruggles cherished his brown-haired daughter, certainly; but he was sensible of the fact that there was a time for mating, and Gunlock would not have appeared in the least objectionable as the girl's suitor.

There was, however, a thing he cherished far more than Naomi. A possession without which the existence of Naomi would hardly have been tolerable for him. A possession which alone justified his own existence. It was his land. His thousand odd acres of virgin forest and austere barrens. His shining domain of primitive and unspoiled woodland. That was more valuable to him than his body, heart or soul. And Gunlock wanted it. He could as soon have stripped Ruggles of his skin.

Nevertheless, he had come striding through the store, his every footfall striking Ruggles' ears with a sound infinitely disagreeable and irritating. Emerging from the door, he gave Ruggles a deep-voiced, genial greeting.

"A fine day, Ben!" he boomed. "The air's like wine! It makes a man glad to be alive, I tell you, a day like this!"

"Good morning, Ralph," said Ruggles. He spoke with his calm dignity. "You want to talk with me?" he asked.

Gunlock blithely ignored the suggestion of a previous finality in their discussions. "Yes," he said, and coming down the three steps with a grous and heavy tread, he approached the old woodsman with a great air of good fellowship and assurance. "It's about that land contract!" he proclaimed.

It displeased Ruggles immeasurably, all this atmosphere of self-confident salesmanship; but it is to be noted that he fell into step with Gunlock and paced beside him toward that knoll along the river bank where he was accustomed to make his decisions; his "study," where he had erected a rough table of hewn timbers and a few benches, which depended upon the natural support of tree stumps and convenient low branches. Here, in the open, beneath the ceiling of moving foliage, he liked to sit at his dockets in fair weather. He liked to feel the presence of the even, flowing river, and, looking up, he liked the startling beauty of the scenery spread about him. He liked to know that all this forest land was his; all this possession of the very body of nature.

Love of the forest was an integral part of Ruggles. In his youth it had brought him from the congested warrens of the English midlands. He had struggled for love of it, fought for possession of it, and many a time had brushed the cloak of death for the privilege of living in it. In all its changing aspects, he loved the beauty of it without knowing or confessing it was beautiful. He loved its smell, its myriad noises, its apathetic suggestion of the teeming life concealed within its screen of foliage. And he loved it for

something more. Something impalpable and indescribable which existed between the forest and his soul.

As he strode with Gunlock into the little pathway that threaded the bank of the river, it was as though they were devoured by flames; a seething glory of multicolored foliage enveloped them. Autumn had dressed the forest in a brilliant and varitinted garment of daintiest fabric as if it were going to a party. Or, in another sense, it was as though the trees were flaunting in the face of an approaching winter the last and most bedazzling aspect of their wild, brave beauty. The flaming laces of the foliage, and the brilliant carpet of weed and lichen were an assurance, so to speak, that winter might have its season of austere and frigid glory, but that the sap would run again. The costume of the forest might be cast off after its challenge of blazing splendor; but the sap would run again to bring back a new life clothed with living green.

To the men, possession of this forest was a matter important to their lives. To the forest, the existence of mankind meant nothing. Yet they sat in the heart of it and contended. Ruggles heard again all the promises of Gunlock's salesmanship. He sat silent and permitted the younger man to pass from one phase to another of his debate. He heard him out; his pleas, his logic, his cajolery, his forceful urging. Greeting each passage with calm silence, he drove the man on to further effort, further argument. He made Gunlock produce trick after trick from his box,

acknowledging new ones with a little nod, deprecating old ones with a frown.

Finally Gunlock stopped short. He had a last trick up his sleeve but always he had stopped short of producing it. He was in truth reluctant to accept finality. For nearly a year—since he had assured himself that these lands were desirable—he had pressed his contention for Ruggles' property. He had declined to accept refusal after refusal but had ridden forth time and again with new and subtle argument. Now it seemed that all was unavailing. The time seemed to have arrived when he must use his final trick; but before he produced it he stopped short.

"Well? what do you say?" he asked. Silence answered him. He summed up. "It's no use my going over it all again," he said. "I tell you you can lose nothing by it. A fortune for your declining years, and a cosy home for Naomi in some more civilized place than this. She can't live here all her life you know. She will marry some day. And she should have her opportunity in a larger place. A city. And you, yourself, you know, have a good many years yet.

"Come! You know my plan is a good one. A fortune for you. To enjoy life. . . . Well? What do you think?"

"Go on," said Ruggles. "You have said all this before. Go on."

"Go on!" burst Gunlock, then. "You say go on! What more is there to say? You are not blind.

There is Naomi to consider. Surely, I have said enough to make it plain for you!"

"But you have said all this before. I have given you my answer to it all. I don't want to sell my land. Not an acre of it."

Ruggles gave his final answer this time with a new tone in his voice. No longer was he going to leave a loophole for Gunlock's persistence. If Gunlock refused finality this time, he would emphasize it for him. He would be harsh.

"And you have said that before," Gunlock reminded him.

He stepped forward and leaned across the table, bringing all the force of his personality to bear upon the old man. His voice was resonant, his whole face beamed with the vital energy of the man's desire. Only his blue eyes were hard with a metallic hardness. Gunlock had the eyes of a dominant but unscrupulous egotist.

"But I don't believe you mean it. I believe that you will come to agree with me, Ben; if you only give up your stubborn hold on the idea that these woods are a part of you." Then, seized with inspiration, his voice changed its tone; became suddenly sympathetic, congenial. "If it comes to that!" he cried. "Doesn't my suggestion fit in with your own idea? You cannot keep these woodlands under your control forever. You know my reasons for wanting to possess them. An overpowering sentiment. Yet my plan is the same as yours. When I was a kid my father was a regular king in these forests, wasn't

he? Just as you are now. All right. He lost his hold when the Company went; he was only a factor—a steward for them. But it has been my dream to have them back, to take my place in my father's shoes. King of all this forest." He swung a hand about, indicating the woodlands. "And we disagree because we both want the same thing!" he concluded.

"Precisely." Ruggles smiled the flicker of a smile.

"All right. But you can't control them always. As you get older, the hold on these thousands of acres is sure to slip from you. After you are dead you can't keep the woods away from the lumbermen and the farmers, can you?"

He paused, letting his argument have its effect.

"But I can!" he boomed, answering himself. "In my hands your forest is secure. Because I have the same plan for it as you. Think of that!"

It was all very dramatic. Gunlock might have been selling stocks; indeed he had sold stocks in his day in precisely the same manner.

Ruggles looked up at him with tilted head and a dangerous glint in his cloudy eyes.

"Young man," he said, "if you had stayed here in the clearings as you grew older, you might have got for yourself these acres you desire, or you might not; but you would certainly have learned that the ideas of a Hudson's Bay Company factor and the ideas of a free trader are not close together. Your father worked for the Company, and became a factor. So could I have done, too; but do you know why I left

England? . . . For freedom. See that? Can you understand that? And there was no freedom in the Company. If you'd stayed you'd have known that. Perhaps it's because you knew it that you didn't stay. . . . So I was a free trader; and do you know how they treated free traders in those days? Did you ever hear of Andy Postgate? . . . He was found shot—by accident. . . . And Cartier Paillot? He was frozen to death—by accident. They were found starved by accident or crippled by accident; or perhaps some drunken Indian murdered a free trader by accident. See? Do you understand that? . . and I was a free trader."

"But you were a close friend of my father. He has told me so." Gunlock spoke very quickly.

Ruggles frowned.

"That we will not discuss," he said. "Your father was my friend, it is true, and that is why you are at liberty to come and go here as you please, Ralph. To ride with Naomi and spend your evenings at our fire. But the land you cannot have."

He arose and striding to the river bank turned his back upon Gunlock to stand like a patriarch blessing the stream below him. Gunlock glowered upon the straight, tall back.

"I don't believe it," he blurted out. Ruggles turned upon him.

"You have said I am old," he enunciated severely. "Perhaps. But as long as I live these lands are mine, and they are for Naomi and my grandchildren after me. I want you to understand that. You are always

welcome here, Ralph, and I hope you will come to this place often when you are in Marbrek. But we may as well come to an understanding now that I will never sell. I tell you now that I shall never sell to you an acre of these woods, and that is final. There is nothing more to say. That is my answer always."

The effect of these words upon Gunlock was startling. He had indeed to turn away from the old man, knowing how darkly his emotions clouded his countenance. It was his way to keep his jaws firmly pressed together, but now his lower jaw protruded so that his mouth was distorted in his passion. A dark flush suffused his throat and rose angrily at the back of his neck. In his eyes a flame of ominous resolution leapt up, and the man was possessed with a positive and ugly menace. When he spoke his voice had become gutteral and thick.

"I'll never give in, Ruggles!" he said. "It is necessary for me to have this land. I am set on it. I'll never give in."

Ruggles, unable to see the man's face, could not fail to hear the menace in his voice. He spoke sharply in his clear tenor.

"There's nothing more to say. You must think the matter over, and if you can come to visit us without keeping up this unending argument, do so. You are always welcome." He turned toward the little pathway which threaded the woods to this spot, and would, no doubt, have gone, but Gunlock threw a word in his way to bar him.

"I will!" he cried, and that incoherent revelation

of his purpose brought Ruggles about, staring. "I say, I will!" repeated Gunlock more lucidly.

"Will what? What are you talking about?"

Gunlock's face was clear now, a clear healthful bronze, but his jaw still protruded in a willful grimace, and his eyes held their cold, metallic menace. But nothing came of it.

"It's all right," he muttered lamely. "Go on. Let us leave it at this." He came a step forward. "Perhaps you will think better of it."

"I shall not think of it at all. I have not thought more about it for weeks. I am decided."

Gunlock had been playing mentally with that last trick. Should he use it? It would mean finality, but it might win the game for him. He had decided to use it; but in a flash his mind had changed. Yet the fixed and stubborn opposition of the old man irritated him. To him it seemed that the old man was deliberately tormenting him; atrociously standing in his way. It was intolerable, and the old man seemed contemptous of Gunlock's power or his strength. The old man was mocking him. Flouting him. Very well, he would use it.

"Surely, Ben, you haven't forgotten that you owe something to my father. He told me of that. I don't see how you can afford to refuse me at least as a partner."

His hard voice rang with the knowledge of his power. But Ruggles did not cringe. Instead he was transformed miraculously into the man who, thirty years ago, had fought the Company for life.

His eyes flashed yellow and he sprang upon Gunlock like a panther. He seized the man's shoulder, as though with one lean arm he would pick him up and fling him to the ground. Gunlock's lips writhed with the sudden pain of that grasp and in his surprise he would have stepped backward, but the old man held him like a trap. The fiery eyes flashed into his, the clear tenor voice achieved an astounding power without rising in tone or inflection.

"You have said enough, now!" that voice pronounced. "I know how much your father owes to me, and how poorly he used the place I gave him! The whole world can know it now. It wouldn't believe it. But not from you! You will never mention that matter again with your feet on my land! You hear me! Never!"

He stepped back, at the same time releasing Gunlock's shoulder.

"Yesterday," he said, "that would have been enough, what you said. From another man, anyway. But you can go. We will forget it."

Again he turned to the path, and spoke to Gunlock as he left him with a queer relapse into his former serenity.

"We won't talk about this land business again," he said.

Gunlock watched him go. He was stupefied at the surprising turn of events, dazed by the devil he had stirred in the old woodsman.

"Good God!" he muttered. "It was a threat. He meant that he might have killed me! What a fool

I was to think he could be bent, and he—a damned old fool!"

Suddenly the realization awoke within the man that he had been silenced. Overborne by the man he would have duped. It maddened him. Overridden! He who was made to override! The flush rose to his throat, the blood diffused his eyes again. With a distortion of countenance which would have made children laugh, he dashed forward with his hands clenched, in a passionate rage. He overcame that, however, as in years long past he had learned to overcome the devil which deranged his mind. He found it was not profitable to reveal his anger. Anger was more potent when the antagonist did not suspect it. So, instead of rushing after Ruggles to vent his rage. Gunlock strode to his mare with a masterful composure.

Naomi, her slim body fitted admirably to the colorful scene, and her serious, boyish face challenging the forest with its coloring of gold and red and crimson, stood at the bridle of his sable mare. She was petting the animal in a cool, boyish way. No baby talk about Naomi; nothing of gush or sentimentalism, reflected Gunlock.

"You'll spoil the old animal," he said.

Her wide lips broke in a smile as she examined his face.

"He refused you, didn't he?" she asked. He frowned.

"I guess so."

"I think it's perfectly useless, Ralph," she said,

"and, you know, I think you'd better give it up. He's quite set, and you're making him—You're upsetting him."

"All right. I think so. I won't worry him any more about that, I guess. But it's been good to have an excuse to see you, Naomi, hasn't it. I'll have to come just for that now. Just to see you, Naomi." He tugged clumsily at a strand of hair which hung beside her forehead.

"Yes," she said. "Just for that."

"It's mighty nice to have a little friend like you in these wild places," he essayed. He spoke with a queer constraint, so that it might have surprised a hearer to listen to him thus reveal himself a lover. It was somehow incongrous.

She smiled a very serious smile.

"Oh, it's nice to have you come, Ralph," she murmured, as though moderating the sense of his remark. "We can never know how it may turn out, can we?"

"It'll turn out just the way you say," he assured her. He mounted.

"Good morning," he cried down to her from the prancing mare. "See you to-morrow. To-morrow evening, anyway."

And she answered his smile as he rode away. But the smile he had given her was not of the lasting sort. It fled before the flood of thoughts that welled up in his mind. 'An unclean spring, it seemed, defiled the surface serenity engendered by his meeting with the girl. As he rode the river trail, which followed the stream to Marbrek, a black cloud gathered

GUNLOCK ACCEPTS FINALITY

upon his face. He dealt with the sable mare viciously and she plunged and bucked, tossing her head in fury. So he tore a whip from a willow tree and thrashed her with it; thrashed her with his lips asnarl and his teeth clenched, with a cruel hand on the curb. He cursed the sable mare, and she struggled vainly. He was in a great rage.

CHAPTER II

A PLOT IS HATCHED, AND CUMMINGS WITHDRAWS

Mr. Tracy Cummings sat in dolorous collapse upon Gunlock's mother's easiest armchair. The burden of ruinous years lay upon his prematurely gray head, and imminent death gave him company. Cummings was at the end of his tether, and he sat in the flimsy living room of the frontier cottage, contemplating that fact, when Gunlock came home from his defeat.

The massive man entered with a heavy tread that made the frail house tremble. He looked for a brief instant at the crumpled man in the armchair and spoke to him shortly, with a trace of contempt in his voice.

"Is she here?" he demanded.

Cummings looked up with haggard eyes, with something in his long, wasted face which suggested the pleading of a dying hound.

"Your mother is at the mission, I believe," he said in a lifeless voice. "I've been rather bad this morning."

Gunlock stood with his legs apart, gazing out of the window at the fresh sunlight beyond.

"It's all up," he said, "as far as buying is concerned.

The old man won't sell—not an acre. He turned me down this morning—finally."

Cummings looked quickly up at him. There was something fateful and dramatic in the gesture with which, after all these months, Gunlock admitted finality—defeat.

"Then we're done!" Cummings rose to walk up and down the carpet. "It's my luck!" he cried. "My rotten luck. I have no luck. It was my last chance!"

Stumbling up and down the room, he appeared like an aged man, fighting death. His lean head, disproportionately large for his short body, hung forward between his shoulders on a drooping neck. His haggard eyes surveyed nothingness with the intolerable stare of the consumptive.

"No!" said Gunlock.

"Could you lease the oil rights, then, do you think?" With a hopeless countenance, the invalid regarded this ray of hope.

"No," announced Gunlock again. "The only way would have been to get the land outright on the understanding that it would be preserved in virgin forest. The old man's wild about that. A single tree cut down, a single oil derrick in those woods would drive old Ruggles mad."

"But you say we can't have it outright. . . . I knew we could never have it."

Gunlock turned to him impatiently. "Sit down!" he said. Cummings continued his shambling pace. "For God's sake, sit down!" roared Gunlock in sud-

den rage. "You slink up and down like a caged wolf! I can't stand it. Sit down."

Cummings collapsed in the armchair.

"I have been pretty bad this morning," he remarked, and a hectic spot of color upon either cheek bore him out.

"All right," pronounced Gunlock sympathetically. "Now I want you to listen. I had a card up my sleeve that I thought would bring the old man over. And I played it this morning, but it failed, see? . . . I reminded Ruggles of his friendship with my father who used to be factor here for the Company. a store where Ruggles is now. But he just told me a sob story about the old days. You wouldn't understand it all, but in the old days the free traders had a hard time. The Company factors didn't want them about. They had no lawful right. 'em got shot-by accident, you know, or their outfits got lost and they starved or froze. He reminded me of all that. See?"

"Ruggles was a free trader?"

"Yes. Of course he was. Well, about the time old Manson died—he was the factor then—Ruggles wasn't wanted around here. He was getting too much trade with the Indians and breeds. He had a queer way with the Indians and they liked him. Anyway it was decided to drive him out once for all, and just then old Manson died—by accident. He damn near cut his leg off with his ax—by accident. See? And he was found dead in the woods. . . . So my father became the factor then; and the ax

old Mansion had been using was my father's ax, and my father had lent it to Ruggles. See? . . ." He glowered upon Cummings with his forehead surprisingly damp, and his breath amazingly short.

"Anyway my old man became the factor, and Ruggles, he stayed on the land."

Gunlock took a long breath.

"That was my last card, and it failed. I thought the old man might be scared by the knowledge that I knew all about it, but he knows that the story is dead as a doornail now, and he's right." He stopped short very suddenly. Cummings evidently was not enlightened.

"The fact remains, however, that it failed," he said. "I don't see how it can help us now."

Gunlock drew a deep breath and stared at his partner with glittering eyes.

"Well it can," he said. "You see how Ruggles got his land now, don't you? Manson was going to drive him out, but Manson died by an accidental stroke of an ax—Ruggles' ax. And there was something between Ruggles and my father after that. They were strong men in those days, Cummings. Strong and powerful, and relentless. It was every man for himself; and so they are in the States, you know. You know that. Burrian wouldn't be where he is now if McComber hadn't been killed. That was done by a man named Carr in Texas. Burrian paid for that killing, and it gave him his start. And God knows how many suicides and failures followed when

the Amalgamated Oil went up in the air. See what I mean? A man must be hard, relentless."

Cummings glowered at a threadbare spot in the carpet. "Go on," he said.

Gunlock turned away from him, took up a position at the rickety table against the wall, and leaned upon it, facing Cummings once more.

"You say that the oil is there?"

"Of course."

"Of course," echoed Gunlock. "But we must be sure." And after all they were sure. Cummings was the best commercial geologist in the country; and their tests had been corroborated. "Of course," reiterated Gunlock. He drew a deep breath once more and regarded Cummings with painful concentration. Suddenly he spoke, brusquely, with metallic clangor in his voice.

"Ruggles got his hold on those lands because Manson died by accident. Afterward the Company lost its hold and the country was opened to settlers. Ruggles was there on the spot and he grabbed right and left. All right. We can get those lands in the same way if Ruggles should die by accident. They would go to the girl then, and we would be on the spot." With a gesture he silenced a sound which the haggard man with lifted head and open mouth was upon the point of uttering.

"I've given this matter a lot of thought," he said, "and I know the man to do it. It's Brade—Dan Brade—a gunman. You heard of him down in Oklahoma; they call him Dakota Dan Brade. If that man

was up here and got into a quarrel with old Ruggles, old Ruggles might get shot—by accident. See?" He paused, grinning with tight lips, breathing hard and fast. "That's what I'm going to do now," he said.

Cummings sat huddled in his chair throughout Gunlock's justification of this desperate measure. He had set forth nothing to interrupt his partner, but he had thought his own thoughts. Now, feeling himself, as it were, forced to speak, he gave voice to the conclusion he had reached.

"Then we part company," he said, "and I guess it's all up." He said it quietly, gazing upon the carpet and his voice had the sound of prophecy in it; the foreknowledge of the grave.

"You're afraid?" sneered Gunlock.

"I have been afraid for the past eight months," assented Cummings. "When I first met you, Gunlock, I said 'There is a man who will stop at nothing,' and I watched you. I was right. But I discovered at the same time that the men who stopped at nothing were the men who attained their desire. The power and wealth you are all hunting. They came to ruin and the penitentiary, or they won out in a big way. So I decided that that was the sort of man I would hitch up with; and I was glad of the chance to go in with you on this thing."

"Then why in hell are you backing down?"

"It's because I am afraid," said the haggard man quietly. "I'm not afraid of death or jail, as you are. I am past that stage. A year ago I would have stayed in with you. I had decided to throw in my lot with

a man who would stop at nothing. . . but it's different now. In a year I shall be dead and—it's the truth I'm telling you—I don't know what's to come after."

"Nonsense!" cried Gunlock. "You're all right, man. A few months in the south will make you as good as new. It's just a touch of lung."

Cummings dismissed Gunlock's optimism with a look.

"A touch of lung is all I have left," he said. A remnant that won't last the winter. I know that much. . . . And I don't know what happens next. So you must count me out, Gunlock. I'll have nothing to do with your gun play and bullying."

Gunlock flushed.

"Don't preach!" he cried. "Get out if you want to. If you're scared. But don't preach about it. And another thing, Cummings, if you go, you forfeit all right to a share in this. If the oil is as you say, I'll pay for your services, but nothing more."

"Blood money! I don't want it. I tell you I am a dying man, Gunlock, and I can't afford to play with the future." He coughed. Standing beside his chair in limp pathos, he could not invest even such fateful words as these with the tragedy they voiced. He spoke them with a harsh whisper. "I am a dying man," he rasped, "and I cannot afford to play with the future." It was the epitome of a wasted life.

Cummings was forty-three years old. He looked seventy. He could not have been nearer the grave had he been one hundred. He had been bred in all

the complacent illusions with which a nation seeks to stay the wandering feet of childhood, and the same hand that had dispensed the illusions provided him in adolescence with sufficient spending money to destroy them. This he had achieved with wild brevity, and at the same time he had destroyed himself. Yet in the ruinous college years which left his physique with no resistance against the disease which was to slay him, he acquired the knowledge of and devotion to geology in which science few of his colleagues could equal him. In fifteen years of mining camps and hard drinking, he completed the ruin of his body and his reputation. His disrepute finally outweighed his proficiency, and from the office of expert advisor to greedy exploitation he had sunk to the dubious avocation of a tool.

He had met Gunlock in the oil fields of Oklahoma; but that was not the first time their paths had crossed. He had seen Gunlock, a young man, a young man described by men at the top as the sort who would "get on." He had seen Gunlock "get on" in a matter of copper mines, and he had seen him "get off" again. But he had not lost sight of Gunlock. As he admitted now, he appreciated the potential usefulness of a man who would stop at nothing. A star to which his wagon might profitably be hitched; and Gunlock repeatedly demonstrated that he would stop at nothing. So Cummings watched him. Ten years ago, with futile envy, he had seen Gunlock "get on" again very firmly. A manipulation of oil stocks had done it; and having "got on" Gunlock had striven mightily

to turn his paper power into a strength founded upon oil-filled earth. He had failed—married the wrong woman, they said. So he saw Gunlock off again, hunting like a wolf among the oil fields for another hold.

It was then Cummings had met him; determined finally to throw in his lot with a man who stopped at nothing, for Gunlock was still young. They had spoken of their youth, an inevitable topic since no conversation charms like that which dwells upon regret; and Gunlock, being for the moment "off," was sentimental. He spoke of Marbrek, his boyhood in the forest, and so on and so forth. Anyway, they decided to try their luck in the north upon a possibility that rumored evidences of oil in Gunlock's native country might have a foundation of fact. They had come to Marbrek and found it so. They had made surveys and tests. Cummings was not to be fooled in such matters. There was oil and it lay under Ruggles' land. The preceding winter they had started negotiations with the old man and it had come to this refusal. The man who would stop at nothing. however, saw his golden opportunity and was ready to take it as Burrian, the cattle baron, had taken his; as Ruggles, in his day, had taken his. These were merely two instances of men Gunlock had seen gain power from the death, the destruction, the obliteration of whatever stood in their way. Gunlock could do it too.

Cummings saw this with painful clearness. Indeed, it was because he had discerned that Gunlock could do it that he had joined the man's enterprise. Cummings had seen, in Gunlock's ascending star; in these acres, apparently easy of acquisition, rich harvests for his wasted fortunes—a plethora of debauchery for his declining years. But it had come too late. With the self-hypnotism of the consumptive, he had held his disease in mind as a static illness which he was doomed to carry to the grave. And all too late he discovered it to be an active and malignant force, carrying him with dreadful velocity back to primordial clay. And he had no hope nor faith with which to meet that disintegration.

"I can't afford to play with the future!" It was all he could say.

Gunlock stared at him morosely.

"It means nothing to me," he said, "your getting out. I shall go through with this thing by myself and be the better off for carrying it out alone. I have thought the matter out. That Brade fellow is the man to do it. I've given a lot of thought to it. He will come up here perhaps alone, perhaps with one or two others. Somehow there would be less talking about two or three. Anyway we can decide that later. You will find Brade for me. Oklahoma will be a healthful place for you."

"No! I won't have anything to do with this." Cummings was positive about that. "You're making a mistake, Gunlock."

"Don't preach!"

"No. But you never hear of the fellows who fail in things of this sort. When they succeed, their money makes them powerful. The means are forgotten. You never hear of the failures, Gunlock."

"I won't fail." Gunlock in his turn was positive, confident. He had studied the means to power all his life. "I won't fail," he said.

"But if you do. They hang men up here for murder."

"I won't." Serenely confident.

"You've got a kid. A boy-"

Gunlock furious. Gunlock punitive.

"Shut up! Good God, man, you're afraid! You've said it! That's enough. None of your slush. None of your preaching. You've drunk yourself to hell and gone, and you whine because you've got to die. You never thought about kids in Dawson or in Tulsa. Not if I remember rightly. You're crawling. You're whining. Shut up."

The haggard man surveyed him with his cavernous stare.

"All right," he said briefly.

He had thought to speak again—disuasive, admonitory words—but he suddenly recollected the man with whom he dealt. The man who would stop at nothing. One of those unfortunate creatures, Gunlock was, doomed to be eaten by an acid that corrodes the soul. Gunlock was of the army of the unassuaged ambitious, who blindly have played a not ineffective part in the evolution of the race. They must bear through life a hunger for riches and great power that will not be abated by achievement. Greed leads them into dark places, and never, whatever pin-

nacle of success they may attain, to happiness. They cannot avoid it; they cannot help themselves. Cummings, understanding these things, forebore to press his plea.

"All right," he said, "but I'll have nothing to do with it. I shall go south to-morrow."

"And you won't see Brade?"

"No."

"I can find him. Any number of the Tulsa crowd will put me in touch." Then, with a twisting lip, and closely approaching his erstwhile partner: "Don't let your piety make you confess anything I've told you, will you? I can take care of my own sins, you know."

Cummings smiled, becoming horrible in the act.

"Don't frighten me," he said. "Of course I won't squeal, if that's what you mean."

He shuffled toward the door.

"I guess I'll see Swinburne about a buckboard. I'll leave to-morrow."

"How about the land you've picked up about here?"

"Don't be scared. I'll turn it over to you before I go. Fix up the papers."

He was out in the little passageway now, coughing and moaning as he muffled himself for the tortuous journey of a few rods distance. It did not occur to Gunlock that he might visit the stables for the wretched man and let him rest. He had gone over to a pine table in the corner, which was his desk, and plowed among the litter for the papers he sought.

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While Cummings choked outside, he was keen upon his scent of land, of oil, of riches, of power.

"There's the La Bret place and the free quarter section we took over in your name," he bellowed.

"Yes," returned Cummings' hollow voice. "The La Bret place." A touch of sarcasm, a note of mockery pervaded the sick man's utterance. "And my share of the store; remember that. I owe you for that. Don't forget it." He was gone.

CHAPTER III

A GLIMPSE OF DOROTHY

Cummings was gone; a shambling figure; such as causes a passer-by to wince apathetically. And with the mockery of his voice, agitated by the ratchet of his cough, he passes out of this narrative.

You may see him, if you wish, sitting haggard beside the driver in the buckboard that took him south upon the morrow, and, since it had its bearing on what was to come after, you may have a glimpse of him in the tiny apartment of Gunlock's wife.

In New York he had come in touch with her, sipping the hospitality of an old acquaintance. Haggard, he sprawled in the presence where once he had sat upright, a certain distinction attaching to his straight, thin body and prematurely white hair. He had known Mrs. Gunlock when she was Dorothy Melden, and men like Gunlock himself had gathered at her father's house to hatch schemes of far-off exploitation. Gunlock had moved with these men, studied their methods and modeled his own upon them. Unwarily, however, he made the mistake of marrying Melden's daughter to use the father's strength; and instead, Melden, who was, after all, only a tool for stronger men, had leaned full weight upon the strength of his horrified son-in-law. That

was the occasion ten years before; a time of mighty crashes on the Street. With her father on the verge of ruin, Dorothy had played upon her husband shrewdly, using an infant son as lure (a part the unfortunate child was doomed to play full often), and through her Melden had sapped Gunlock's strength. The fall of the house of Melden was one of the mightiest of that season's crashes. Melden had gone out with it, transferred from the shattering scenes of fevered conferences to a bed from which he never rose again, and Gunlock, cursing, was "off" once more to start anew.

Dorothy now played the part of abandoned wife. With a few thousand dollars saved from the wreckage of lavish establishments, she lived in tiny but expensive rooms. The boy she sent to various schools, planting him in one and plucking him from another as her means necessitated. She had lost track of Gunlock since he had departed from the Oklahoma fields, but had not dismissed him. He was to pay, she decided. Finding Cummings, she pounced upon him eagerly. She had heard of his association with her husband and greeted this gift from the gods, this heaven sent messenger (for her funds were low) with enthusiasm. She brought him into her apartment and pumped him.

"I have started suit for a separation," she told Cummings; but her eyes were bright. Her face was framed in a wealth of straight, flaxen hair, which she coiled loosely about her brow; but it didn't soften the hard brilliance of her eyes. "I owe it to the boy," she said. "But he will have to pay. He is a rich man. You know that, Cummings" (it was her way to address male acquaintances thus patronymically) "and he will have to support us."

Cummings coughed, his eyes appraising her.

"I'm afraid you have a small chance of getting money from him, Mrs. Gunlock. He has only a few thousand dollars now, and he needs that for his land contracts."

"Land? Oh, do tell me, Cummings, what's he up to now?"

He beat about the bush, but she pinned him down. "Oil!" It was out; Dorothy usually got her way.

"Then he will be rich. I knew it, and he would let me rot here. Get a separation on his present financial condition. He would cheat me! You see, Cummings, that's what I have to deal with. Chicanery, double-dealing. And there's the dear boy to consider, you know. You say it's a place called Marbrek? I've half a mind to go there. Any women there, Cummings?"

Oh, he was lagging enough, he was slippery enough! But she wasn't to be evaded. She pounced on the girl, Naomi, at once.

"You say he's dealing with her father? What is she like?"

And the poor fool, disgusted with the woman though he was, fast bound to the devious code of his kind though he was, gave her what she wanted to know.

"I assure you he has no interest in the girl, Mrs.

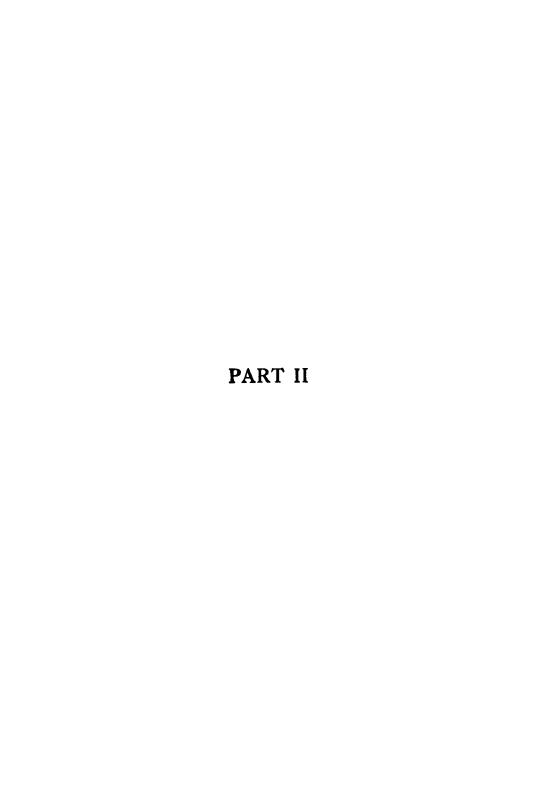
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Gunlock," he said. "She is only a little backwoods creature, a child."

Her eyes gleamed then. So Ralph was interested in a little backwoods creature! She would see about this.

She continued to pump the wretched man, but his efforts to evade this terrible woman induced high fever and, on the verge of collapse, he was bundled into a taxicab and sent back to his hotel.

As far as this narrative is concerned, Cummings, except for this brief scene, was gone.



No.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW GUNLOCK SPENT A WINTER

After Cummings left the settlement, winter came, and a life which had lain inert during the hot summer and the minor activities of harvest time in the clearings was aroused into industrious movement upon a white ground of snow. For, despite the changes that years had brought, despite the toilers who had painstakingly cut into the forest for their farms, as the stonemason cuts a smooth surface on granite. Marbrek still responded to the call of the trap lines. Thus winter which, in the temperate parts of the earth, is likened to death and to sleep, the twin brother of death, in the high north brings a resumption of life. The dogs of the Indians and trappers. fly bitten and hunger ridden in the summer months, smelled the coming snows with renewed spirit, for they knew the first snowfall would arouse their neglectful masters to the need of well-conditioned animals for the winter hunt. And the masters responded eagerly. They awoke from the days of torpor in mosquito-infected heat, and made ready their harness, their snowshoes, their traps. Life came with the winter, and the happiness of great achievements with the snow.

The forest stretched dark upon the white, and held

the snow in fantastic filigrees upon the branches of its trees. Barriers of spruce and pine arose from the great drifts formed about them by the advancing elements, and what were impenetrable thickets of brush and branch in the torrid summer were covered with a floor of crystal. The profound stillness of the winter air accentuated and gave loud voice to the creaking branches and the violent contractions of the frozen waters. The river was a broad white highway now, weaving an inviting pathway through the black expanses of the forest. A place for Jean Girardeau to move with his sled and his dogs, a black agglomeration of active animals upon the still, white fields; a place to crack his whip and shout loud pleasantries to Duncan McKeagh, the half-breed, who was encamped snugly on the bank.

Yet the river trail was not abandoned. There were few winter days when the people of the clearings could not press their horses with a light cutter through that open highway into the settlement, and Gunlock was not an infrequent traveler that way. Ruggles himself had caused that trail to be cut and roughly graded, and only later events can reveal how well pleased he was with the visitors it brought him. How Gunlock made use of his calls at the Ruggles place that wintertime can only be guessed. If he reopened the subject of his desire for the land, it is to be presumed that he touched upon it only lightly, or else tactfully, for the fact remains that he kept his welcome warm.

Gossip had it that he was courting Ruggles'

daughter, and the fact is that most of his time upon the Ruggles' place was spent with Naomi. They read and played and talked away evenings and afternoons. They took the trail together, walking the woods on snowshoes, hunting and trapping. The girl had been isolated by a lack of unshackled young manhood in the community. Gunlock was the first male of her kind who had ever so courted her companionship, and she granted him that without stint. She granted it very gladly. He was handsome; he was big and powerful. He was kind to her, and courteous.

Sometimes they spoke seriously together. He would ask her questions. Hypothetically he would put them to her, in his resonant, earnest voice. Did she think she could ever tire of his companionship? Could she trust him always? Infinitely? And she would evade him, shyly suspecting an offer of marriage was implied, and afraid of it.

Yet their companionship, their propinquity was so close. It had become a matter of fact. They were like brother and sister together, and yet she knew that after all they were not brother and sister. It pleased her, yet perplexed her, that Gunlock had so firmly, so thoroughly become an integral part of her life. It seemed to her that this companionship could have only one consummation—a consummation that was inevitable. And why not? She asked herself that question often in her loneliness. He was good, and splendid. He was strong and resolute. He was well-to-do; and he cared for her; he desired it. Why not?

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And ultimately the answer came always in another question. Do I love him? Can I love him? Can I marry him after all is said and done? The intimacy of the proposed relationship appalled her. It was for all life, and she was unable to imagine herself as the intimate companion of Ralph Gunlock all her life. I should have to love him very much, she thought. And then: Love him! I wonder what love is.

CHAPTER V

WHO IS GEOFFRIAN?

Spring came, bringing thaw and a distemper of mud and ugliness. The forest drooped, mangy in its barren, exfoliated nakedness, and the clearings were horribly exposed in their muddy fields, their blackened stumps, and their pitiful, dilapidated dwellings. A seasonal dirge of melancholy brasses, moaning through bare woodlands. A dirge for winter; a majestic season dead.

Or perhaps an overture, for, swift upon fading dissonances, new birth brought the sounds of pæan to the forest. While the trappers brought their pelts for barter and exchange to the trading posts, seeds were planted in the clearings, and a fresh, singing garment of green gossamer veiled the trees. And the song birds came north again.

Strangers came to Marbrek too with the springtime, following the newly opened trails; and among them, Geoffrian. Geoffrian came as May days blossomed into June, and upon a particular evening he sat by the window of the club at Marbrek, the object of silent and somewhat resentful curiosity.

The club at Marbrek is a planked room off the planked lobby of the plank hotel, which is nobly called the Maple Leaf; and Geoffrian, having finished his dinner, sat in the dim window smoking a briar pipe. A young man; a tall man; a man with a broad brow and a humorous mouth; a college man, one would guess—and be mistaken; a man with an athletic body, an admirable head; and, apparently, a contented man.

This it was which provoked resentment; that a man as well made as this, a man with such evident possibilities, but with no manifest plans for future usefulness, should be content, savored of insolence in Marbrek. And he was clothed too well. Bedford cords were of a good design-ready-made. but the best of ready-mades. The flannel shirt he wore beneath his serge coat was the sort of flannel shirt that Malcolm, the bank manager, sent outside to procure at vast expense because Mrs. Malcolm said he had a position to keep up. Such things were all very well for Malcolm or for Gunlock, the merchant, or for Parrot, the lumberman. These men had made their contribution to the community. They had come to the Northwest with nothing, you understand, "not a damned sou," Parrot would say, "I clerked ("clarked." he pronounced it) in a filthy shop at Prince Albert for seven years before I came here. I can smell boots and shoes to this day. Smell 'em! Taste 'em, by God! I can taste the beastly things!" But for a youth, newly come into a place where men struggled against the howling wilderness to further civilization-cordurovs and mackinaw shirt would have become him better.

Geoffrian smoked his pipe until the tobacco was consumed, watching the daylight die out of the street

that movements of men and horses had made in the cleared space between the rows of scattered houses which were Marbrek. Then he knocked the ashes out upon the hearth and left the room. The representative men of Marbrek, who had been fitfully coming into the room while he had smoked, listened to his footsteps as he crossed the naked floor of the lobby, heard the door snap to behind him, and the wooden steps creak as he left the porch of the Maple Leaf; then, while their wives, the traditional gossips of the community, did housework in their separate homes, they dealt with Geoffrian about the comfortable stove of the club.

Brundage spoke first. He was the Episcopal missionary; short, dark and sturdy. A man without subtlety.

"D' you know what he's going to do?" Brundage referred to Geoffrian with a serene assurance that the subject was a desirable one. "He'll go over to his room, light the lamp, and read. Read books. That's the only thing he brought with him . . . four books. He'll sit there reading them . . . one is by a French chap named Stendhal . . . and he writes . . . great sheets of foolscap. I've seen him do it. He writes all over the place. In the margins of the book, the blotting pad, everywhere. But, do you know, he'll never let you see what he's writing—or the books. Just got a look at the back of one once. Do you know what I think?" A pause; impressive, portentous. "I sincerely believe he's a remittance man." Gravity followed.

"He's bought two horses," said Swinburne, the livery and feed man. "Now what can he want with two horses?"

"It's a damn shame!" said Parrot. "God knows we need workers badly enough in the camp and the clearings. I asked the beggar if he'd like a job in the mill. D'you think he'd take it? Not by a jugful. He mouthed something about not having decided on his plans. His plans! Good God!" Parrot's teeth were long, his mustache drooped, he looked like an aristocratic Englishman. His father was an Irish grocer in Toronto.

Malcolm deprecated Parrot's trenchant attitude. Malcolm was a good business man with a wonderful head for figures and a simple philosophy of which he was secretly proud. "You'll see Harry Malcolm at Marbrek," Geoffrian had been told. "He's grown a beard and looks like Jesus Christ. You'll find him a good fellow." That's how Malcolm looked and that is what he was.

"You know some of these remittance men turn out quite well when they find themselves," he said. "Although the only one I ever had much to do with cashed a draught with us at Moose Jaw on a cattle firm he wasn't connected with."

"That's it. They're a shifty crowd," beamed Gunlock, and he swung his big body away from the fire to face the others. Among these men of Marbrek, he was big and dominant. He pressed his heavy lower jaw firmly against the upper one so that his firm ruddy checks were in that manner lifted, and his otherwise

rather heavy face was made to beam genially. Also a hard, uncompromising glint, natural to his eyes, was softened thereby, so that few noticed it. He spoke largely.

"They're a shifty lot," he said, "and, what is more to the point, for it's no use misjudging a man's honesty, they're useless. He brings his money here, you will say. What of that? It produces nothing. What Marbrek needs is the man who will produce. Parrot comes and starts his lumber mill. He brings lumbermen here to cut the wood. Sells the lumber. Produces money. Swinburne does the same thing with his horses. Develops pasture land. And Malcolm with his banking, and Brundage, and Father Chapotin; all develop the country. Produce. are the kind of men we want in Marbrek. the sort of wealth which is desirable." He turned his genial personality upon the fire again, thinking his own thoughts. His bulky shoulders were not the sort to knock chips from.

"Brundage, you ought to know him better than we do. You can't have a man living in your house for a week without discovering something of his character." Thus Malcolm, cannily. He learned toward Brundage and spoke confidentially. "Now, what do you think of him, eh? Is he a trustworthy man? Is he reliable? Tell us something about him, eh?"

"He paid me for his horses cash down," declared Swinburne, unexpectedly.

"Of course you want to know about—what d'ye call em—risks," said Brundage thoughtfully. "Well

he paid Mrs. Brundage two weeks in advance for the use of those two rooms upstairs, and we didn't want it, you know. And he's a jolly civil beggar."

"It's a damn shame," whined Parrot. "No room for remittance men in Marbrek. We want—er—men who will produce."

"But if young Geoffrian is honest and means well.
. . I think we ought to wait and see what he does," suggested Malcolm.

"But he doesn't do anything," snarled Parrot. "He doesn't say anything which suggests that he means to do anything."

"Benefit of the doubt, my dear boy," soothed Malcolm. "Geoffrian promises infinite possibilities compared with those three bounders at the La Bret place."

"Now that's sheer nonsense, Harry." Gunlock boomed into the conversation. "You've got your knife in those men because they are ruffians. That's what they are, ruffians. But ruffians do more to develop a place like the La Bret farm than any other class. Ask Parrot. He'll tell you his best lumbermen are the roughest. And the new farmers down south—all the roughest of the rough."

"That's all very well," smiled the bank manager, "but Scott should be back from his patrol next week, and when he comes in I'm going to ask him to have a look at your three ruffians."

"Not mine, please," snapped Gunlock, "and Scott came back late this afternoon; and he had a look at them when they first came. I'd rather have one such

honest man come here to work the clearings than a whole army of lily-handed wasters such as Geoffrian."

"But Harry is right. We have no right to judge this young man until he has made himself known." Father Chapotin, speaking for the first time, did so with a gentle assurance that he would be heard and his words considered. "Mr. Brundage says that Geoffrian reads. A good sign. He may be a poet; and in Marbrek to-day a poet would be more useful than another merchant. He writes, you say. Would not an engineer, sent here to report upon the possibilities of a railroad, write voluminous reports? I tell you we cannot know why this man is here nor what he is; but we can feel quite as certain that he may be an angel in disguise as that he may be a devil in the mantle of a remittance man. Let him show us by word or deed." And the club was silent for a moment; only Parrot snorted and Gunlock thought his own thoughts.

As a matter of fact, Geoffrian was neither poet, engineer nor remittance man. He was a person more necessary to Marbrek for the moment than any of these. He was a policeman; and, while the men of Marbrek discussed him, he was closeted with Scott in the worthy corporal's cabin home just outside the settlement.

CHAPTER VI

CORPORAL SCOTT EXPLAINS

Corporal Anthony Scott, R. N. W. M. P., dwelt in a two-room log cabin, neatly built, and, by virtue of Mrs. Corporal Scott, immaculate. In a corner of the living room he had erected a shelf, three planks broad, each plank eighteen inches wide. The height of a kitchen table, he had erected it, and above it two smaller shelves which were laden with neatly docketed papers. It was his desk; his work table.

Geoffrian found the Corporal sitting before this table, just returned from a ten-day patrol, and resolutely facing a neat pile of papers which, manifestly fresh from their envelopes, lay on the table before him.

Like so many human beings, these papers, each pressed into different folds, resisted the corporal's efforts to flatten them out.

The corporal regarded them belligerently. Gray-haired, snub-faced, and dutiful, Scott was not to be browbeaten by a mere pile of papers; and yet he faced an uphill battle, for these crackling documents were official things, and some of them were forms. Forms baffled Corporal Scott. Give him an arrest, and he could make it. Ask him to cope with whatever odds in the matter of bone and brawn, and he would do

so. But forms were another matter. It was not fair.

He was not a stupid man, nor was he illiterate, nor unversed in booklore. It was merely his limitation and the measure of his mind that intellectually he stood upon the threshold of understanding forms.

"My name is Geoffrian—William Geoffrian," said the young man, and he laid an envelope upon the corporal's desk. "I am ordered to report to you in mufti for special duty, which you are to explain."

"Oh, aye!" remarked Scott, who had not dropped a native Scottish inflection from his speech. With great energy he whisked the paper from its envelope, plunged into the pile of correspondence on his table, and came to the surface with a particular document in hand. With great deliberation he compared this with the letter Geoffrian had delivered, and then, satisfied, looked upon the young man as a buyer of horseflesh might survey a prospective purchase.

"Sit down," he said, with heavy hospitality, and his tone, his bearing, conveyed that "we must go slowly, we must think this matter over." Aloud, he said again, "sit y'down Mister Geoffrian." And Geoffrian, having bestowed himself, was surveyed with grave deliberation.

"Ye must know, Mister Geoffrian," Scott pursued, "that there are three men but recently come to Marbrek who are causing considerable anxiety. . . . Considerable anxiety. They came here some three weeks ago. Where they came from we canna tell. Why they came we do not know. But they came;

and they are not desirable . . . not desirable at all . . . not in any way desirable." He rolled the "r" a little more each time. He was impressive. "They came from the south, from Lost River way, I should judge. I tr-racked the marks of their buckboards for some miles into the south." This much Corporal Scott imparted with memorable dignity, for he was proud of it. "They came in a buckboard, the three of them, and are now at the old La Bret place, which you will understand is a clearing some eleven miles up the river from this place. There they are, and what they are up to I can't tell y'. But we all of us have grave doubts, and the men of Marbrek press me ver-ra har-rd for an investigation of these facts."

"I know," Geoffrian nodded, "I have been here a week."

Scott nodded. "Ye have been here a week," he repeated. "Ver-ra well, then It is my opinion that these three men are gutter rats—the scum of the cities; and likewise think all the men of Marbrek. They ask me to throw them out, and that I could do easy enough, for I misdoubt they have no title to the place they live in. But mind y' this, Mr. Geoffrian; to do so would not be conformable with good policy... not in any way conformable." Scott

gazed severely upon his youthful guest. "Not conformable at all." he concluded.

"No," said Geoffrian. "Of course."

"It would not be conformable," pursued Scott, "because while these three men are at the La Bret place we have them in our two hands. We can obser-rve them and discover whether they be hatching some misdeed, or whether, on the contrairy, they be fugitives from justice. When we discover their purpose we can then take proper-r action, Mr. Geoffrian . . . proper action you will understand. And that," exclaimed Corporal Scott with unexpected warmth, "that is what I told Superintendent Cuthbert; and that, moreover, is why Superintendent Cuthbert sent you to Marbrek. D'y ken?"

Upon which dramatic climax Corporal Scott assumed so impressive an air that it seemed as if nothing more could possibly be said upon the matter.

"You mean that I am to watch these men and discover their purpose?" proposed Geoffrian.

"Precisely," said Corporal Scott. "Ye'll let no one know you're with the police, and keep y'r eyes open, just."

"Who is this La Bret? The man who made the clearing?"

"He is out of it. A trapper, he was, and trader. A wanderer and an unpractical man. He took the place for a homestead, but tired of the clearing and went on into the north. I should tell y'r that the property is now owned by a man named Cummings who came here with Gunlock when Gunlock returned to Marbrek two years ago last April. A puny man, Cummings was and he went into the States for his health's sake. He'd have no knowledge of these three beauties, I take it."

"I see. But what did Cummings come to Marbrek

for, and why did he take a homestead in the clearing if he was a puny man?"

Scott warmed to Geoffrian. This was a policeman after his own heart, a proper sort of policeman.

"Aye. That's well put. Gunlock is native to these par-rts. His father was in the Company when Marbrek was trees only. But he went out into the world. When he came back two years ago, as I've made plain, he brought this man Cummings with him. They opened the store together . . . you know the Gunlock store . . . and had fine plans for buying land, so that the place could not grow without it put money in their pockets. Cummings took the La Bret place among his lot. He said a sawmill might go there; though what use a sawmill might be eleven miles upstream from a settlement seventy miles from a railroad. I cannot pretent to infor-rm y'. However, the poor man sickened and went to the south as I have said."

"Have you any suggestions to offer me for my work?" asked Geoffrian; and Corporal Scott acknowledged the flattery with further deliberation.

"Oh aye," he said. "I've given considerable thought to the matter, and can tell y' how best to go about it. There's a queer vain man who possesses great quantities of land to the west of the La Bret place, and the river trail which passes the La Bret clearing was, as a matter o'fact, built by him for the purpose of approaching his preserves. The name of this man is Ruggles. He is old, and he is peculiar, but he has a great hospitality and a friendliness for

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people who properly respect him. If you make the acquaintance of old Ruggles, you can pass the La Bret place with great disinterestedness and, if y' are equal to the occasion, make the acquaintance of the three men verra casually."

"That's a good idea. What can you tell me about the three men?"

"Oh that I misdoubt but ye'd better judge for yourself. After y've made their acquaintance we can talk further of it. I can tell y' this much, however. They are gutter rats. . . ." Corporal Scott emphasized his verdict with a snort, and then, with a sudden thought of practical helpfulness, he took from the back of his desk a much thumbed chart and spread it out for his visitor to look at.

"Ye'll be wanting to know the lay of the land," he said, and thereupon entered into a detailed and painstaking description of the river trail. The river trail, which was to lead Geoffrian through doubts to fair fulfillment. The river trail, which was to be memorable for him as long as he had memory.

CHAPTER VII

FIGURES OF THE NIGHT

Springtime was a birthday for Geoffrian; and, as he made way from Scott's cabin toward the settlement that night, he celebrated it. He let his eyes dwell upon trees, fresh budded and obscured by the light mist, or misty in themselves because of the feathery leaves which barely clothed them — because of blossoms. He breathed with great pleasure the scented air, and remembered how, in his boyhood, he had lain upon the grass in Central Park — near the red museum, it had been — and smelt that scent be-. . . And other springtimes. In the night fore. air his body absorbed the knowledge that, however small a thing this spring might be to the high indigo spaces above him, on earth it was a good thing. A million birthdays . . . months of being born again.

Swinburn's barns were the first buildings of the settlement which Geoffrian approached, and these were apparently closed for the night. Only a lone buckboard with two shimmering horses stood awaiting its passengers outside. The horses whinnied as Geoffrian approached, and tugged at the halter which held them to the hitching rail. So Geoffrian looked upon them and felt that the moonlight, rippling across

their bodies, made an appropriate contribution to the beauties of the night. Then he saw that a man had emerged from the shadow of the barn. A man and a maid; and, silently, the girl was weeping, so that Geoffrian could glimpse the sheen of tears upon her cheek as the moonlight caught her face.

As Geoffrian passed them, he heard the man swear coarsely, laughing at her grief. Seeing Geoffrian upon the road, the girl drew back, and the man left her to walk Geoffrian's way. It was a regrettable thing, reasoned Geoffrian, frowning slightly, that this man should intrude upon the fair nighttime; but so it was, and this man might have information of the three he was to watch. He was of the sort, Geoffrian conjectured, his three beauties might consort with. So he let the man catch up with him.

"Hullo!" he said, as they came abreast.

"Got a match, Jo?" answered the nightbird, and he embellished his remark with profanity indicative of his pleasure at having run upon a prospective light.

Geoffrian provided the match and studied the man as he lit a cigarette. This, he decided, must be one of the three himself. Without doubt the man was a gutter rat, and had upon the face of him the sickly mark of the gutter. Geoffrian was surprised at the man's diminutive proportions, although he remembered that beside the girl this stunted thing had appeared as short as she. In the light of the match Geoffrian saw the man's gray-white face. His small features and narrow, shapeless mouth invested him with a certain sly weakness, and above them his eyes

were remarkable for their dark and liquid glow. Brown eyes, they were, and they seemed to smolder hungrily, with a hunger, Geoffrian fancied, which seemed to devour the man himself. Beyond that sickly face, overshadowed, when the flame went out, by a long-visored cap, Geoffrian caught a glimpse of a dirty soft collar, a shrill scarf, and glittering pin.

The man was in a confidential humor as he moved beside Geoffrian toward the heart of the settlement. Coarsely he dwelt upon the inertia of isolated places.

"A guy might uz well be in a mawg," he complained bitterly. He went into detail.

"How long've you been here?" interrupted Geoffrian. ("Mud puppies," he thought.) He had seen the soft mud-colored creatures wallowing in aqueous slime at some zoölogical park. This man resembled them. Stunted, repulsive.

"I dunno," answered the mud puppy.

Geoffrian did not hear his unspeakable babble as they walked. Could he endure to deal with such men as these? Study them for a day, a week, a month, it might even be, without showing his hand?

The mud puppy babbled on until they approached the portals of the Maple Leaf. From this hostelry emerged a tall thin man who seemed in the moonlight to glide across the bare open way toward them.

"Oh, Jim!" said the tall man softly; and as Geoffrian saw his lean face in the moonlight he received a fantastic impression that it was carved from stone—from dust-colored granite. He drew away from the mud puppy as the tall man approached and barely

FIGURES OF THE NIGHT

heard the newcomer speak to the stunted man, so soft was the inflection of his voice.

"Yo' all had best come back to th' buckboard, Jimmy." The voice caressed the mud puppy, and again Geoffrian's mind conceived a fantasy: the lean man's voice caressed as a serpent caresses its prey. There was something of nightmare in those two, standing in the moonlight with the wide, bare spaces of the muddy street stretching around them. The little man had his face upturned to the tall one, like a changeling child with intolerable knowledge in its eyes. And the tall man spoke silken words.

"I shouldn't wonder its right late for these here parts," he said. The two grotesque figures, each with its distorted shadow dancing wierdly behind it, made their way towards the waiting buckboard.

"It is the moon," decided Geoffrian to himself as he pondered the night's adventure. "Human beings cannot be as obscene as that. It is the moon." And he breathed the pungent air once more; but he reflected that other things than exaltation are born of springtime, and uninvited guests can come even to birthday parties.

CHAPTER VIII

GEOFFRIAN TAKES THE RIVER TRAIL

In the morning Geoffrian chose the dun gelding, which he was beginning to understand, and set out for the river trail.

Brundage and Malcolm stood outside the bank discussing railway shares (which neither could afford to possess) and they greeted him as he turned into the street.

"A fine morning," cried the inspired missionary.

"I think that's mental telepathy," said Geoffrian, drawing rein. "Want to cash a draught for me, Mr. Malcolm?"

"Well, you know . . ." replied the bank manager.

"I hope we'll see you at the Chapel on Sunday, Geoffrian," essayed Brundage. "You might do something with the boys. Just the sort of man we need, eh?"

"If I can," said Geoffrian.

"Drop in at the bank this afternoon," ventured Malcolm. "We'll talk about it." He was thinking of the remittance man at Moose Jaw. A pageant of bad draughts passed through his mind. It is the psychology of bankers. "And I say, why not drop in and

have luncheon with us some day." The little man's better half prompted him.

"That's good of you," remarked Geoffrian, who was gathering up his reins. "Name a day."

"On Thursday." Vague conjectures upon matters commissariat. "Say Thursday."

"Right. Thursday luncheon, and many thanks. Good morning, Mr. Brundage. Good morning. Good morning." The dun gelding came up to a canter.

"Now what do you think, Brundage? Eh?" queried Malcolm with a certain birdlike pertness, characteristic of him.

"Don't know. He would make a good man for the boys though, wouldn't he now?"

"I suppose I'll have to cash it," sighed Malcolm, and trotted into the match-box bank.

The dun gelding alternately cantered and single-footed a somewhat skittish way along the river trail, and soon had Geoffrian out among the clearings. A singular beauty possessed the forest in the spring-time which made each recurrence of the season notable. Geoffrian, who was keenly sensitive to the almost voluptuous beauty of the woodlands, felt this completely.

However many years a man may spend in the northern forests and however profoundly he may enjoy the white beauty of winter snows and the purging frost; whatever fascination may be laid upon his soul by the crackling curtain of the many-colored borealis, by the illusions which people the land with ghosts and make phantoms of veritable things, and by the shrill

silences which immeasurably accentuate the many sounds peculiar to the winter woods; in spite of these enchantments, each spring must be notable for him.

A northern winter fills a healthy man with pride in his excessive healthfulness, in his might of mind and body against elements presumed to be too much for him. With the close of winter cames a time of thaw. A brief period when the earth is sickly with night sweats and morbid exudations. And then spring comes, and the man's exultation in himself is replaced, if he be of good stuff, by the overwhelming splendor of a miracle.

The chemical processes which make up springtime are to be obtained for the asking from a thousand learned men. But that man is happiest who never learns to understand the miracle, or having learned rejects his knowledge in the presence of the performance.

Geoffrian was of these last. Having a certain knowledge, he refused to call upon it. It was enough for him that spring had come and that, riding through the singing color of the river trail, he could enjoy it.

The miracle had touched the clearings with a penitent caress, as though the ineluctable forces which had produced the departed winter would propitiate the human beings it had so harshly visited. And the clearings, like so many Dutch uncles receiving the advances of conciliatory relatives, basked complacently before the offering. Geoffrian passed them from time to time. These clearings had been made for the most part by men of the woods—men to whom the

forest was still a paradise of living fur; but whom instinct or reason had told was to be possessed of another value. Other clearings were made by men from the outside. Pioneers, if you like, or refugees from habitations less desirable.

Geoffrian reflected as he rode. A glimpse of the river. Ah, that was a fine sight. Gray rock and the water foaming. How colorful that clump of birches on the opposite point. Another homestead. Each homestead in the forest seemed like a kitchen chair in an empty house, foretelling the coming of the family which was to move in, or recalling the household moving out. Funny idea, that. Wonder what in Heaven's name made me take up policing? Romance, of course. Romantic idiot, that's what I am. And the uniform, of course. That draws most of us in, and its a good thing for a man, too. A hard job to live up to. A high ideal. A bright uniform.

Another clearing. Gad, those flowers are lovely. A carpet of them. Purple crocus . . . wild roses . . . wood violet. Wait a minute, Muddy, let's look a minute Look, here's some woodbine, vetches . . . dwarf cornel. Muddy, it's early for that, you know. And some people pick 'em. As soon tear a kitten's head off. All right, go on.

We ought to hit the La Bret place soon. By George, that river's fine. Icy cold, I'll bet my face on it. Moves like . . . like a river . . . that's it. Can't get a better word for the irresistible flow of water. Moves like a bloomin' river. Look at that curve . . . what a sweep. And I'm a police-

man. Good thing for a man though. Something to live up to. Let's see, Scott said it was a frame shack with a tar-paper roof. Said I'd know it by the neglected clearing. Rotten condition. And a barn eight by ten. He said there was a hillock on the river side of the trail just across from the house. A brush-covered hillock bare of trees. I'll have to look out . . . and ride right by the silly place. Mustn't look at it too closely or they'll suspect me, filthy beasts. Just ride right by. Gad, what a day! . . . Ah, got you that time.

Among other things born of spring were the mosquitoes.

And there was the La Bret place, a wide clearing, uncultivated, unfenced. Brambles covered it deeply with here and there a jack pine. The shack was well away from the woods and some two rods from the trail. A roadway long since overgrown with weeds ran past it, and the fresh marks of a buckboard followed this ruinous pathway to the "eight by ten" barn behind the house.

The place was still and peaceful with the awful peace of dead things when Geoffrian passed it by. Its three occupants were evidently not abroad yet; but they might have been miles away for any sign of habitation they bestowed upon the place. Only the wheel marks in the tangled roadway hinted at their presence.

Geoffrian made a grimace. This possessed an unsavory flavor. Of all the clearings, this one most

suggested desolation. . . . A stinking, evil sort of hole, he decided; and, having passed it by, he hitched Muddy to a flaunting June-berry sapling and reconnoitered. "Don't know you well enough yet, old animal," he apologized, as the dun gelding protested the imprisoning reins. So Muddy philosophically slew the June-berry sapling by denuding it of its leaves and bark.

Scratched, hot and mosquito-chewed, Geoffrian returned to release his mount. "A rotten hole, Muddy," he explained, "but well protected. A nasty stronghold to get at but an easy one to surround. And there's a trail which leads away on the other side. . . . That's a nice note! Nothing like a song bird to put the proper touch on a spring morning; and what colors! Wish we didn't have to wear clothes, and politics weren't so rotten. Clothes and politics. Sex and selfishness. . . . This is what we call a train of thought."

So on along the river trail, with a nice feeling for the springtime and a vague consciousness that all was not right with the world. That there was a stunted mud puppy in it, and a lean man with a silken voice.

"Wonder what the other gutter rat's like?" wondered Geoffrian. "And now, what?"

He had come to what was apparently the end of the river trail as far as it had once existed in the substance of a wagon road. From this point on it appeared to be merely a wide, uneven pathway cut through the tangled greenery of the river bank. To the left of the way, however, was a great archway, designed of a tree bent to this shape in its saplinghood, and through this archway a well-cut, wellgraded road, wide enough for a wagon to traverse, swept with clean lines into the virgin forest.

"Oh," reflected Geoffrian. "Estates, baronial holdings and ancient purlieus. This must be the Ruggles place. I must try to appear as if I wanted to know him."

With which he turned the dun gelding through the archway and rode through a woodland parkway banked with green. Always it seemed as though the stunted mud puppy and the lean man kept him company, riding, shadowy, behind.

In half a mile he came to the outbuildings of the Ruggles establishment—neat cabins where beady-eyed Indian children played before the doors with French half-breed companions almost as swarthy as they. There were flowers outside some of these cottages and an air of well-being. These were the homes of "his" trappers and river men, and persons attached to "his" household, as Ruggles proudly would say. Then, half a mile further, a clearing with handsome log stables and barns. A great field of plowed land, green with sprouting things, and in a grove of spruce the single-story log home of Ruggles himself with the log store building behind it.

To this home, more closely protected by the thick belt of forest surrounding it than by any possible wall or fence, Geoffrian rode with dignity. A half-breed boy slid up to his bridle and, dismounting, the rider saw his dun gelding taken to join company in waiting with a sable mare which stood saddled near by.

He approached the neat house, which possessed the dignity of fitness in its woodland setting. He knocked upon the door and waited. A girl opened it. A fine, lissome girl with hazel eyes and a wide firm mouth. A girl who was not beautiful, but good to look upon. A brown-haired girl whose eyes sparkled because of the mind behind them. A girl of character, thought Geoffrian, and he looked in her eyes over long.

"Is Mr. Ruggles here?" he asked.

"No, he is not," she said, and stood aside. "Come in."

Peculiar thing, Geoffrian reflected, I can't take my eyes off her.

"I am Naomi," she said, and he brushed by her, touching her garments with his own.

CHAPTER IX

GEOFFRIAN MEETS A DANGEROUS MAN

He had explained that he had ridden from Marbrek to speak with her father "upon a matter of business." And he wondered what the business was going to be.

She had assured him that her father would return in a little while. "He is in his study," she explained. He gazed about the wide, low room, the rugs upon the floor, the piano. (The clearings owed the width of their river trail to the fact that old Ben Ruggles had decided his daughter should have a piano to practice.) But there was no sign of any other apartment which might be called a study.

"It's in the woods." She smiled at his mild wonderment, and he hoped she would have cause to smile again. Although there was a certain likable vivacity in her eyes when her face was in repose. . . "There is a place along the bank he likes," she was saying. "He has some benches there and a table. But he prefers to walk up and down. He decides things there. Mr. Gunlock is with him now."

Geoffrian remembered Gunlock. The large, handsome fellow who loomed up about the place. The dominant, excessively manly fellow.

"Oh!" he said, and conceived an absurd suspicion.

He would test it. "Let me see," he said. "That's the bank manager, isn't it? I met his wife."

"Oh no." She laughed (so that the remark had been worth while, he decided). "That must have been Mr. Malcolm. Mr. Gunlock runs the store; besides he isn't married."

"Oh," he remarked, and his suspicion deepened. Not married, eh?

A bell tinkled. "That's the store," she said, and was gone through a narrow door. Some talk of this and that he heard in the store beyond; the girl's voice, clear as her eyes, and with the same fresh quality in it. . . . was it the vivacity of youth? but Lord, no other girls had it, and he had seen flocks of 'em. Younger than this one too. . . . Wonderment? . . . that was closer. . . wonderment . . . wonderous. He discovered with surprise that he was capable of being profoundly idiotic.

She was back, her face reposeful, unmarked by frown or grimace, yet thoughtful. Startled by the phenomenon, Geoffrian realized that he could feel her agitation although she had said no word nor given any sign.

"What's the matter?" His words spilled out quickly, taking him by surprise, and her, too, for that matter. Wonderment was surely in her eyes when she turned them upon him now.

"What do you mean?" she said.

He was amazed at his betrayal of himself. "Like a kid. A silly young kid," he argued within his mind. He said: "I thought you looked—well, agitated. It was rude of me, but I let the thought slip out."

"I didn't mean to," she smiled. "Look upset, I mean. It was that long man from the La Bret place. A man who's living near here. He comes in sometimes and has a way of making me—upset. Just his appearance, I mean But you mustn't mind that. It's silly of me. Poor man."

But Geoffrian knew she didn't mean it. Poor man, indeed! He knew exactly how she felt about the granite-faced one. He knew exactly how she felt about everything. He knew her, had known her all his life. It was merely that he hadn't met her, that's all.

"I've seen him about Marbrek," he said. "He seems like a snake, doesn't he?"

"That's it," she cried, delighted with his simile. "How did you strike upon that idea? It's what I've thought, often."

He had known it. This was very interesting.

"And you are afraid of him?" he asked.

"Well, it's just as you said. He seems like a snake. The color of red rock."

Now look here, thought he, you're not supposed to do that. That's my thought, you know. But he was immensely pleased, and she turned away from the smiling intensity of his gaze.

"Just what I have thought!" he cried. "You know, it's very peculiar, but you and I think very much in the same channels, I believe. . . ."

"I ought to be in the store," she said abruptly. "If

you'd like to wait here for Dad, you must use the room just as if it were yours. There are books in that corner about the Company. People from outside generally like to read them, but it's poison for Dad. He was a free trader. I must go back to the store." She smiled brilliantly upon him and, turning her back, walked through the narrow door again.

Now that comes of good old open-hearted frankness; making your mind an open book, and all that sort of thing, reasoned Geoffrian to himself. . . . Naomi, eh? . . . Naomi! . . . Of course I ought to have kept my mouth shut. If I'd kept my mouth shut we'd have gone on talking for hours. Hours . . . Naomi, with hazel eyes, shining wonderously. . . . Naomi, through the alien corn. . . . No, that was Ruth. . . . It won't do. You can't rush this sort of thing I ought to have kept my face shut. . . . Oh, Naomi, what good friends we'll be. And I'll fetch a snake skin for you!

He bethought himself of his mission. Her father might be coming back at any moment, and he must have an affair of business to talk over with him. He reviewed eligible affairs of business.

I'd better be a young tenderfoot from the east, he decided. Now what would a young tenderfoot from the east be inclined to do in a place like Marbrek.

. . Join the police. of course; but come, less levity. . . . I know; I'll go in for ranching. Hog ranching. . . . It is of the greatest importance that I secure a suitable tract of land for hog ranching. . . . That'll hold water. . .

Ruggles came in through the great oak door which the girl had opened for Geoffrian, and Gunlock held the door open as though he were the old man's lawyer, while the master of the house passed through. Geoffrian remembered how he had ever so lightly brushed her garments.

"Mr. Ruggles?" he asked, advancing toward the two men.

"Hello, Geoffrian!" boomed Gunlock, and genially, he introduced him to Naomi's father. "Mr. Geoffrian is a newcomer," he explained.

Ruggles, straight as a quarter staff, and more than six feet tall, rugged in black flannel shirt, corduroy trousers and mocassins, greeted his visitor, and saw him seated by the fire with a simple courtesy becoming to him.

In the moment of a silence inevitable to that situation, Geoffrian surveyed the two men as he seated himself with them, and made mental notes before the talk began. Ruggles, he saw, was long past the stage of ostensible dominance. He had reached that haven of successful despotism where he rested confident in the knowledge that his decision was as a cosmic law. Therefore, he carried himself with quiet dignity.

Gunlock, Geoffrian could not read so easily. His estimate was absurdly influenced by the suspicion which had come to him while he spoke with Naomi. He found himself studying the man for his possible appeal to "such a girl as that." The appeal was there without a doubt. This Gunlock was a big, handsome fellow. Strong as an ox, reflected Geoffrian, and

with a dominant manner of his own. His eyes fairly crackled with the geniality and enthusiasm he could put into his gaze if he wished. And he seemed able to project the vitality of his entire great body into his voice and personality. He could be irresistible, guessed Geoffrian, if enthusiasm or purpose moved him intensely; and something else, not so desirable. "Something else," whispered a voice in Geoffrian's mind. "This man is capable of some other quality you have not yet guessed." Geoffrian gazed upon his man, and puzzled over this matter while they talked of business affairs.

"Yes," he had been saying, "my visit is purely a matter of business. I have only recently arrived in this country, and am unwilling to go into things without consideration. A valuable thing, consideration, I think, before one goes into matters. Now I thought—I've been thinking a great deal lately—of hog farming. You know, pigs. I read in a government report somewhere that this Northern Saskatchewan country is very promising as a place for raising pigs. One farmer says that he was surprised at the returns which came to him from raising pigs in Northern Saskatchewan. And since my uncle, whose name, as it happens, is Geoffrian, too, did a great deal of pig raising in Ireland, it occurred to me that I'd like to try it for myself."

While he spoke he was seeking that elusive "something" in the unsuspecting Gunlock. Geoffrian possessed a happy faculty of appearing to be what he emphatically was not; and while it never became quite clear to him what had prompted him to join the Mounted Police that summer's day in Calgary, the fact that he was gifted with the ability to play the fool while he shrewdly studied his man without doubt had something to do with it.

I haven't quite got him yet, he was thinking. And he watched the big fellow narrowly as he sat genially advising the prospective pig raiser.

"It's ill advised. That's the way to put it," Gunlock was explaining; and he set forth all the major objections to hog farming in Northern Saskatchewan. They were many. "It's not that we want to belittle the country, old man. But it would do no good for the place if you should sink money into it and fail. Every failure reflects against us, even if its undeserved."

"But what have hog-farm plans got to do with your visit here, Mr. Geoffrian?" The old man permitted himself a smile of amusement. "I have had no experience raising hogs. We just rear what we need. A few."

"The point is—I was just coming to that," said Geoffrian, with one eye, like a sentinel, ready for a glance at Gunlock. Surely this game of digging the man out was impertinent. None of his business. But Geoffrian liked to study men. Some day he was going to write a book about them. And he continued to keep a sentinel eye on Gunlock.

"I want to buy some land," he said. "They have told me in the village that you own many acres of the best land hereabouts. It is just the right distance

from the settlement, too." But before he finished his sentence the sentinel eye gave alarm, and Gunlock betrayed himself.

"I want to buy land," Geoffrian had said, and Gunlock's genial eyes had become suddenly hard with a strange glint of hardness.

"Danger! That's it." The discovery blazed up in Geoffrian's mind like a thin flame. This man can be dangerous. Then: Now, why did I think of that? Did he betray it in his face? Surely not: his expression hasn't changed since he entered the room. But with the finality of an intuition it was entered upon Geoffrian's mind that this great genial fellow was not genial; he was dangerous. As a wild buffalo resembling so closely the friendly cattle of the kraal is dangerous in its unsuspected ferocity. The words went on; Ruggles spoke, Gunlock spoke, Geoffrian spoke; then Ruggles, Geoffrian, Gunlock. But it did not interrupt Geoffrian's mind. As they spoke, the policeman found that he was whimsically considering how it would come out if this big man and he should come to fight.

"I am sorry," Ruggles was speaking, and the voice of the old despot of the forest carried with it a desinence which brought Geoffrian to earth. It was amazing that the old man should be able merely by changing the inflection of his voice to thus call a halt to the conversation. "As it happens," the closing sentences went on, "Mr. Gunlock troubles me with the same matter. But the lands which belong to me are not to be bought or sold. They never will be

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bought or sold again. Never!" He frowned. With this young man there must be no mistaking his finality.

"I see. But surely I am not mistaken about the pigs? This country should be a good pig country, should it not?"

"Will you stay with us for a bite to eat?" asked Ruggles.

"No. No, thank you. No." Geoffrian wondered if Gunlock would stay. "I must get back to town. Something to take up with Malcolm." He turned to the door.

"Wait a bit. I'm riding to Marbrek, too." Sure enough it was Gunlock. They mounted together, and knee to knee rode down the drive to the archway. Geoffrian measured his man. He's forty pounds heavier if he's an ounce, grinned Geoffrian to himself, and he's strong as an ox in the bargain.

CHAPTER X

A RIDE WITH GUNLOCK

Obsessions are to be avoided. It's all very well to delve into a man's character and draw what conclusions you may. It's fair enough to rely on your conclusions, too, to a certain extent (a certain extent, mind you) but that sort of thing mustn't become an obsession. Now here's Gunlock. Teutonic sort of cuss, and doing his best to be a good fellow. Why under the sun shouldn't I accept him for what he pretends to be? Nothing to do with me, what he's got underneath.

Thus, Geoffrian, erect upon his single-footing steed, and listening to the hearty voice of Gunlock riding beside him.

"Fine people," Gunlock had been saying, "The best in the country. But the old man's very oldfashioned. He clings to the older days. That girl of his is a splendid woman, though. She'll compare with the most cultured women of the east. Naomi Ruggles will. . . And so on.

Now why must he talk of Naomi? considered Geoffrian. . . . But surely he wasn't judging the man because of that? . . . Odd, but I can't get rid of the feeling that this fellow is an ugly customer.

I think we will. . . . Now that's a funny thought. Sort of thing the novelists call destiny . . . the preordained. Yet I can't help it. A fellow can't help this sort of thing—thinking, reflecting.

He examined his companion's powerful profile. Gunlock had the appearance of a city man; a man of affairs on the face of him. He might be a business executive from Chicago, looking over his timber tracts, as he rode his sable mare along the river trail.

"Are you going in for farming, too?" asked Geoffrian.

"Oh, no." There was a calm rebuke in the man's voice; a sort of warning that inquiry into his affairs was not welcome. "I am interested in the land. I think some of Ruggles' property should be in more progressive hands. I know this country very well, was born and raised here. I am not impertinent when I tell you that your plans for hog ranching can only result in failure."

(Damned impertinent! thought Geoffrian, unreasonably.) "Oh?" he said.

Gunlock turned to him, vibrant with personality. "Of course, you may not be serious. Perhaps you are seeking the land for another purpose entirely?"

Geoffrian had no difficulty in appearing honestly surprised. "No. No, indeed. Why on earth should I want land save for farming it?" he said, and gazed at the big man with a certain ingenuousness concealing his shrewd examination.

"Of course. Of course. It was just a thought of

mine." And it occurred to Geoffrian that Gunlock spoke rather hurriedly,

Now why the devil was that? Which way was the wind blowing now? . . . Do you know, I believe this fellow is rather a deep one. . . . He's got something up his sleeve. . . . And there's the girl. . . . Hope the girl's not included in his devious workings. Sounded almost as if he's afraid I want to take the precious land away from him.

But for the time being Geoffrian found that his thoughts could not dwell upon material things. There was the girl. . . .

Gunlock, for all that he had seemed to dismiss the thought of land and Geoffrian's interest in gaining some of Ruggles' holdings, proceeded to dwell upon it in a different vein.

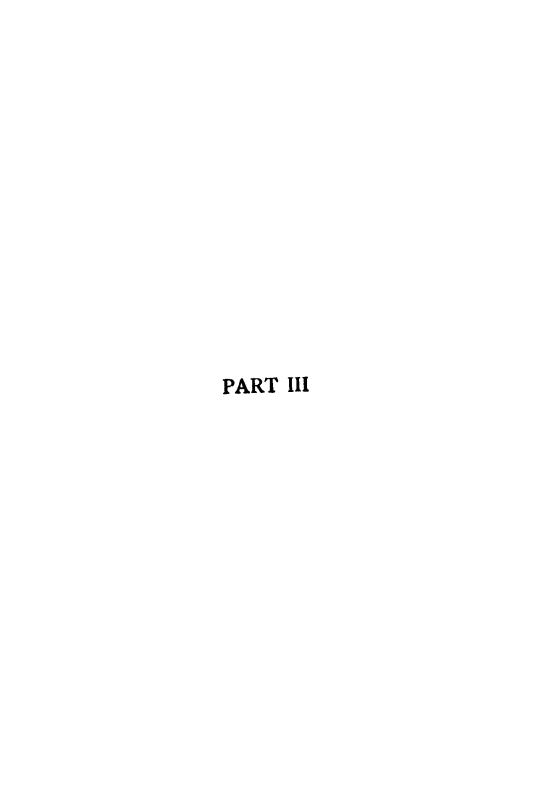
"The old man is tremendously land rich. He must own six thousand acres if he owns a rod. I could well imagine a fellow like you desiring to get some. It contains some of the richest timber in the north. And you're young, with a good, bright mind. Of course it would be natural for you to see the opportunity there. . . ."

His voice went on while the saddles creaked and the ponies rose to a canter or dropped to a walk with an accompaniment of gentle panting which gave life to the warm spring noonday. And Geoffrian was deaf to it all. His mind was upon a lissome, brownhaired girl who had wonder in her eyes and music in the sound of her voice. How well she had fitted into the fine log-walled room. She had given a last

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touch of refinement to the few pieces of metropolitan furniture with which Ruggles had endowed his home. And yet so fitting, she was, against a background of virgin timber.

"But you'll find the road blocked with a solid wall, old man," Gunlock droned on. "That man Ruggles would sooner part with his right arm than with a square foot of his darling woodlands. In his mind the lumberman is the agent of desecration. No ax will defile the forest Ruggles can protect. . . ." And so on while the horses tossed their heads, and Geoffrian thought light-hearted thoughts—intangible as the light mists which caught the morning sun among the woodlands. For the girl was with him; more tangible in his bright imagination than Gunlock or the horses panting on the trail. Naomi, with her boyish frankness, her engaging gray eyes, her red lips.



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CHAPTER XI

NAOMI HAS A PREMONITION

Benjamin Ruggles had worked all his life. That is to say he had never known any other need for life, any other excuse for it. It seemed to Ruggles that, without work to do, time would be an affliction and the world not worth living in. He dreaded the hour when his work would be finished; not because he saw that hour as the termination of his life, but because life would become intolerable for him in that hour. Around that work, and by virtue of it, he had established in himself a sentimental legend. It included beside himself, the protagonist, two other actors: the forest and Naomi.

When the Company had at last capitulated to the march of government preceding civilization into the northwest, and relinquished its suzerainty over the forest, Ruggles, the despised and harried, was among the first to profit thereby. He had taken lands then, and the breeds and Indians who had hunted with him and for him had taken adjacent lands. One by one he took over the holdings of these less provident pioneers; good trappers, they were poor proprietors; and willingly they accepted vassalage to the silent gentleman who was made to rule them. Thus the outlaw had become a power to himself, and thus his

tireless labors brought him dominion. Thousands of acres of virgin forest were his own, and, having sprung from the work of his hands, this possession was part of his life. The woman who had briefly shared it with him, succumbing all too quickly to the unequal strain of being a chattel first and wife and mother after, had left a girl behind her, and Naomi was a chattel too.

Mildly he ruled these lands and creatures which had magically sprung from his life—his work. He accepted them humbly enough, as fruits from the hard-worked field are to be accepted; but in his humility there was no realization that any of these chattels possessed individuality or life independent of himself, or rather of his legend. And this attitude, this legend, was so deep a thing, and so much a part of him that his minions, too, subconsciously accepted it. Indeed, they came in contact with no other being as vital as this master was. They would as soon have struck him in the face as debated their part in the unspoken, subliminal legend which was Benjamin Ruggles.

For Ruggles the day began at five in the morning, taking him into that partition at the back of his store which was his office, to examine accounts, adjust credits, and attend to the myriad details of barter and exchange which his dealings in furs and merchandise involved. Breakfast at six was prepared by the old man and girl together—a conversational interlude, and, for Ruggles, an interlude of sentimental recreation. It was his manner to treat

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his girl-child with mild tenderness and rigid discipline. He exacted from her the same neatness and accuracy which ruled his soul; and she, for her part, responded with a gratuitous industry which delighted him. In the kitchen they prepared each morning meal, with gossip and philosophy; then, in silence, they consumed it. Ruggles never spoke more than the most necessary word at table, and that he gave forth grudgingly. With superlative dignity, he sat in his place, and Naomi, with a like dignity derived from years in her chair opposite him, played the lady of the house. A rare understanding was between them, which, to the end of his life, he never learned to understand.

Rising from the table she spoke to him.

"You'll see about the kitchen doorway this morning, won't you, Dad?" she reminded him. It was her way to carry in her voice and in her countenance at quaint seriousness of which Ruggles approved tremendously.

"Yes," he assured her gravely. "I'll be back to it after I've seen Girardeau's boy." (For he was doctor to his chattels, too.) "And there's Jo Blackbird's dogs to look after. He wants what he calls retribution. He means damages against old Ba'tisse Mercredi, because the old man thought his dog was a wolverine. If Jo fed them properly they wouldn't steal other men's poultry."

It was characteristic of the old man that he would never call upon his minions for work about his household. He conceived that no servants were necessary in an establishment which could not engage his daughter's entire day in housework, nor draw upon more than an occasional hour of his own time for the recurring odd jobs of carpentry and construction.

"Pierre Petitot will be in the store this morning."

And he was away to his buildings and his chattels, leaving Naomi to her housework.

Albrecht Sansebeare, entering through the kitchen doorway two hours later, did so with the greater ease because Ruggles had removed the door. The old man stood with apostolic mien and beard upturned, adjusting a refractory upper hinge.

"Ah, Ben, good morning." Sansebeare bolstered his self-respect with meaningless interjections and contributed personality by wagging a somber mustache.

"Good morning. Is there anything I can do for you, Albrecht?" Ruggles squinted at the hinge.

"Mees Naomi. Ah, is she here? It is—ah—Mees Naomi that I have come to see."

"Somewhere, Albrecht. I'll see," and he lowered the chisel he was using to cross the room and call, "Oh, Naomi. Albrecht Sansebeare wants to see you!

. . . A fine day, Albrecht." The girl's musical voice replied from within.

Ruggles returned to his work, touching it with a ceremonial dignity; and he was deeply conscious of the scented loveliness of the adjacent forest and of that singular effect of the ascending sun upon the woods of a May morning.

Ruggles was thinking in his serene old mind of a thing most desirable to himself, a consummation of which it seemed to him would most easily, most admirably fit into the happy sequences in which his labors had arranged his life. He was thinking of his cherished forest lands, of Gunlock, and of Naomi. So it was appropriate that Geoffrian should appear in his doorway, although Ruggles did not know it was appropriate.

"Let me help you," he said, for the time had come to replace the door upon its hinges. But Ruggles let the door lean back against the wall again, and extended a courteous hand.

"Good morning, Mr. Geoffrian," he said. "I am glad you found your way to our clearing again. Come in."

Greetings and salutations, while the young man and old stood in the doorway with the sunlight streaming in upon them and a profusion of apple blossoms close outside the door; and the songs of birds.

"Let me help you with the door," offered Geoffrian again; and he did.

"I came out to see you." He held the door in place while Ruggles used the screw driver. "I came out because I wanted to see you again. Your home, your daughter, and, if I may say so, you yourself are most interesting. Perhaps you do not appreciate the remarkable atmosphere in which you live. Your beautiful surroundings."

Ruggles glanced at him shrewdly. The young man's frankness was disarming, but evidently it was sincere. A fool, decided Ruggles, to whom ingenuousness was not a virtue. But something in the young man's bearing perturbed him. Geoffrian gave the old despot a vague but disturbing sense of inferiority.

They closed the door with care, Ruggles delighted at the departure of a squeak, Geoffrian commendatory. They shut it with a bang. They were elated. Good humor prevailed between them, and Naomi entered from the interior to intrude upon it with a care.

Further greetings; further salutations, while Geoffrian capitulated to his eyes, which dwelt upon her insistently.

"She's worried," he reflected. "Something's worrying her."

Naomi spoke directly to her father. No airs or graces in her woodland world.

"Albrecht asks me to look after Rosalie," she said with a faint shadow upon her forehead. "He wants me to speak with her. It's the men at the La Bret place." The shadow deepened, fluttered, and cleared as her animation rose. "One of them called Jimmy—Jimmy Mendlesohn. Albrecht says that Rosalie has been meeting him in the settlement. He heard of it and spoke with her, but she wouldn't discuss it. He says he couldn't get at her about it. He is afraid, because he thinks this Jimmy is no good; that he is just playing with her!" Her words came faster, a little excited. She was indignant.

Ruggles looked upon her with imponderable calm.

"Well?" he said, and she responded immediately to

his rebuke, becoming calm. "Will you speak with her?"

"Yes," she said shortly. Geoffrian perceived that she was touched with resentment; not against her father for his rebuke, but against her self, that she had merited it. "He has a peculiar influence over her," reflected Geoffrian, instantly discerning the girl's subjugation, and resenting it.

There followed a pause while Ruggles gathered his tools and replaced them in their proper box. Geoffrian picked up the carefully spread paper which had received the chips of carpentry and Naomi showed him where to deposit them in the sawdust box outside the door, and where to put the valuable paper, neatly folded, with its kind.

"Will you walk out to the river bank with us, Mr. Geoffrian?" suggested the old man. And together they went to that arboreal "study," now beflowered with a blossoming dogwood tree, shaded by balsam, and carpeted with fragrant needles. Ruggles would have greeted with cold contempt the suggestion that he was a poet; yet he made his study in this place. A queer, vain man, Scott had said.

Naomi, after silence and thoughtfulness, harked back to her care again. Geoffrian had felt it. He knew she was soon to speak of it. He wondered if the old man had known too.

No, he decided. He rules the girl's mind; he dominates her. But he cannot understand her. I can understand this girl better than any other human being. Odd thing, that.

"I don't see how we can get around it, Dad," she said. "I am sure there is something evil about those three men at the La Bret place. They look at one so. Evilly. I think something should be done. Rosalie was a good enough girl, 'till these men came. Couldn't we talk with them? Is there nothing you could do, or Mr. Gunlock?"

Now why Gunlock? queried the mind of Geoffrian. Then: Lord, I'm surely not becoming jealous?

Ruggles was watching the even, irrestible flow of his river.

"Leaping River, it's called," he had remarked, "because a half breed didn't know he was coming to a cataract until he went over it."

Now he spoke to the river in a confidential manner, which was his way of answering Naomi. He disdained the troubles of womanhood as invariably trivial.

"Of course they are evil," he told the river. "The world has many evil men in it; and brushing against them is what forms us all. Without evil there could be no good. So evil men are useful enough in their way. The girl Rosalie has true womanhood in her, or she hasn't. Meeting this swine from the La Bret place will prove it, and that's a good thing."

The river he addressed had this in common with his words; its flow was even, irrestible.

"There is a tall man among them," said Naomi. "He is like a snake."

"Why should we drive them away?" continued Ruggles. "To do so would only inflict them on another place. Are we too weak, or our characters too delicate to bear touching them? Leave them be. They fill their place."

He turned to Geoffrian, who, leaning against the table, had been watching the girl seated on the board that ran between the trunk of the dogwood tree and a near-by stump. The blossoms caressed her hair and fallen petals made a carpet for her feet. "Would you think that this current ran nine miles an hour?" Ruggles asked. "From here to the hillock, which marks that same La Bret place."

So he snubs her, reflected Geoffrian. Dismisses her, annihilates her, eh? I wonder she tolerates that.

But he was mistaken. Having referred Geoffrian to the river, Ruggles planted himself before his daughter and addressed her with deliberate benevolence.

"Forget these men, Naomi. Or, I should say, fit them in the place where they belong and leave them there. You can do Albrecht, and the girl, too, a service by talking with her—exerting an influence. But the three men need not trouble you, because they are not in the world you live in. They have nothing whatever to do with us."

"But they are bad neighbors, Dad," she said. "They are the worst. They'd think nothing of killing a man. I know it. They are like that Austrian, Biehl, at Lost River. Do you remember him? He lived beside Mr. Steele for years, and when they quarreled over an apple tree he killed him. These men have the same thing in their eyes. A hardness—I can't tell you what it is; but Biehl had it, and so have they. Like wolves."

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"Now this is not sensible," he said kindly, evenly, but with tremendous power in his eyes and in his quiet voice. "You must stop dwelling upon such thoughts as these. You must. Promise me you will, Naomi."

She looked into her father's eyes for a moment, and with her own gaze betrayed nothing of what she found there, but she assented.

"Yes, Dad," she said quietly, "I will."

How confoundedly he dominated her, thought Geoffrian. But how naturally, and he is kind. . . . He loves her.

Gunlock appeared, as men must always appear on such a slim, winding trail as led to Ruggles' bower, suddenly; with an immense effect of conjury. He beamed upon Geoffrian, but not quickly enough to entirely cover the first hard glint of recognition.

"Hello," he boomed. "Hello, Ruggles. What's this, a party so early in the day?" he said.

"We had a visitor." Ruggles indicated Geoffrian.

"Yes, but I must be getting on," exclaimed Geoffrian. "It has been fine to see your study, Mr. Ruggles." 'And they walked back with him to see him mount and ride away.

How he dominates her, thought the rider. How he dominates everything. He's spoiled, that's what it is. Always had his way. . . . Always.

CHAPTER XII

THREE BAD ONES

Here he was at the La Bret place again; perhaps his three beauties were up now, and about. When he had come to call two hours—three hours—before, they had been languishing, no doubt, in unsavory slumbers within doors. It had been a welcome disappointment, for in the interval he had seen her, had her before his eyes for long minutes.

Now smoke arose in vapors from the chimney of this dilapidated shack, and he set his mare (he was riding the mare this morning) walking up the obscured wagon road. The tall man was lounging on the steps with a thick, blond fellow sprawling on the step below him. This must be the third one. . . . Three of a kind, thought Geoffrian, wittily.

At Geoffrain's approach, the lean man shifted a little on the steps and ran three fingers of his right hand down the front of his heavy shirt, unbottoning it. There was no perceptible change in his blank face or pale blue eyes, but there was a bulge under his left arm, and with a chill sense of unreality Geoffrian guessed the meaning of that gesture. He packs a gun, and is not going to be surprised, he reasoned; but that's ridiculous. Impossible. No, there's the gun under his left arm right enough. Bet he's wanted for murder somewhere.

"Hello!" he was saying cheerily, and he dismounted. "Pretty comfortable here, I take it."

"Yo' all want something, maybe?" queried the lean one with silken accent, and the blond man stood up; a great, hard man with a clear, boyish face, faintly golden complexion and dead eyes, vacant eyes. His scarlet lips were the weak lips of a spoiled boy. His fair countenance was somewhat worn with years and wasting. His blunt nose and well-shaped head spoke of a fine strain in the breeding, but his dead eyes, his vacant eyes, were the eyes of a moron, bespeaking mind without soul.

"Nothing particular," said Geoffrian. Now my cue will be to play the gregarious idiot ready to make friends, he counciled himself. With excessive distaste he did so. "The fellows at Marbrek told me you chaps were new arrivals, too, so I thought I'd drop in. I thought you might be able to help me, too, in a way."

At his side the dull eyes stared at him; from the steps the pale blue eyes gazed upon him without expression.

"Yeah?" remarked the lean man.

"Yes. It's about land." The lean man licked his lips. "I'm looking for some land. Hello. . . ."

In the doorway a stunted, ratlike figure of a man had appeared. It was Jimmy—Jimmy Mendlesohn, of degenerate aspect and smoldering eyes.

"Hello, Jimmy!" continued Geoffrian warmly. The smoldering eyes considered him, burning mystically.

"Jeese!" said Jimmy, and he recited other oaths

appropriate to the occasion. The friendly little gutter rat seemed to have included Geoffrian in all his revelries of that night of meeting. "This is the guy I toldya 'bout, Dan. This sa frienda mine 's name I can't tell ya. Hello, Buddy!"

He slouched down the steps and became ceremonious while the pale eyes looked on, unblinking.

"This is Dan Brade—Dakota Dan is what they call 'im down in Tulsa."

"Don't you go shootin' orf yo' mouth too frequent," murmured Dakota, not moving an atom.

Jimmy cursed jovially and made unprintable references to Dan's interior.

"'N this big stiff is Buck Tanner. He's bugs," he went on, whereupon Buck Tanner leered through his dead eyes and streamed forth profanity in richest Cockney.

"Gladtameetcha," he said nasally.

"Now wat th' hell are you doin' round here?" demanded Jimmy, and Geoffrian knew that here was another man whose tool of trade was the blue steel gun. It was his bearing that betrayed him; the menace which lay behind the veil.

Geoffrian assumed an ingenuous frankness.

"About land," he said. "I've been all around the clearings looking for some land. Just a bit to start a hog ranch with. At first I tried to dicker with Ruggles, who has a place up the trail a way. But the old man is as tight with his land as a Scotch deacon. They tell me this place is for sale. I thought I'd look it over."

Dakota Dan Brade stood up, reared his six feet three against the doorpost, and turned his unswerving eyes on Geoffrian.

"Well, it ain't for sale, stranger," he said. "We all are livin' here right now, an' it ain't for sale. It ain't even to be looked over. We like to be sort o' to ourselves."

"Of course, of course," Geoffrian assured him. "I shouldn't want to disturb you. But over at Ruggles' place there was a man said that you fellows might be moving. Sansebeare, his name was. . . ."

That worked. Into Jimmy's eyes came a light of inexpressible complacency. He winked at Geoffrian, and slyly leered into a reflecting window. Dan's thin lips became a colorless line and his voice a deadly menace.

"He was plumb mistaken, stranger. Now if you'd like for Buck here to help you to get out on to the road. . ." He lounged against the door jamb.

Geoffrian took them all in in one glance, and saw the fair countenance of the imbecile become dark with a horrible satisfaction. Tanner stooped and picked up a short length of iron, apparently a piece of a crowbar. They kill with hatchets and things, thought Geoffrian quickly; and Tanner watched Dan, awaiting his cue. Jimmy leered into the window.

"It's getting right late, stranger," said Dan.

"Then you mean Sansebeare was lying?" and Geoffrian was pleased to see him hesitate, puzzled by the visitor's apparent innocence.

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"Drop that there hardware, Buck," snapped the lean man. "Yes, stranger, he was plumb lyin'!"

Geoffrian turned to his mare. "Well, if you are leaving, let me know," he cried and swung into the saddle. "You can always get me at Marbrek; I'm staying with Brundage, the parson."

Dan silently watched him depart, and Tanner collapsed heavily upon the steps, cheated. Only Jimmy spoke, and he spoke with a leer and with ironic humor.

"Come again!" he taunted.

CHAPTER XIII

GEOFFRIAN'S JOB

Geoffrian rode away into the woods, and found a spot beside the river where he could command a superb sweep of the moving water and see the fantastic decoration of distant wooded shores like a brightly woven tapestry. He made a little fire in an open space of green where flowers were, and sat under the blue sky, grilling his bacon, and pondering with his sensitive mouth adroop, and a long look in his deep gray eyes.

In a force of men which prides itself on the variety of spheres from which it is enlisted, Geoffrian was an unusual policeman. He was humorous with a humor which just missed irony; he was original, absurdly original sometimes, yet not isolated; possessing a feeling for satire, he, at the same time, was not capable of a sneer. For the most part he was willing enough to look upon life brightly, but, like most humorous men, he had a profound capacity for sorrow and compassion, so that he could not be blind to the infinite cruelty of aggressive kindliness nor to the selfishness of conscious charity. Because of these things he had left a conventional world, seeking something more essential in humanity, and here in the voluptuous beauty of the northern forests he had found humanity the same. Only here was a sedative in the

beauty which surrounded him; and an austere resolution in the affairs of nature itself, which served to please him. It established a ground for veritable philosophy to tread upon, and he discovered that man's frailties can be little things in the face of elemental forces.

For a few infantile years he had been educated in a choir school, in a world where richly garbed clerics emerged from palatial dwellings to preach, in an extravagantly bedizened cathedral, the gospel of a carpenter Who had never a place to lay His head. But the boy had not seen the absurd antithesis. The men who had thus sought to propitiate high Heaven by worldly pomp instilled in the mind of the child by their very folly an ideal of beauty, a private and ineradicable splendor which he cherished in his young soul always.

After the various experiences of preparatory school, and uninspired clerking, Geoffrian had fallen into journalism. Then the hidden splendor burned high, so that he passed through the various encounters of early manhood and disillusionment with a God-given discrimination between illusions and ideals that permitted him to cast off the one without losing the precious but intangible fabric of the other. Seeking instinctively the nourishing isolation of the forest, his spirit had led him north. Why he had entered the police was another matter.

Necessity? Romance? A bright uniform? A' predilection for the work? A little, perhaps, of each. However that might be, his mind was, for the pres-

ent, troubled so that his mouth drooped and his gray eyes were darker gray. Beyond the vague loneliness, which lived with him always, he was troubled.

He was disgusted with his job. It was a job which duty demanded he should pursue, spying and watching, searching the house when these three men were gone, tracing their movements as they came and went. These things he must do and would do: yet he was reluctant to do them. Was it sentimentality which sickened him of the very real fact that such men as these existed? Or was the pitiable contrast of these men with the scene in which they moved repulsive in itself? Not that: he was all too familiar with that contrast: to revolt against it would be to revolt against the fact that he himself was human. But there was another, more disquieting, contrast, and that perhaps was it. . . . With an inrush of swift new vision, . . . That alone was it! Naomi! he saw clearly.

Naomi, the trim figure, those alert, wondering eyes; her dear face, pensive under the sunlight. It was insufferable that she could live in the same world as these three black ruffians. And yet they were so near. Such a small strip of ineffably beautiful woodland lay between them. Sometimes, indeed, they intruded boldly upon her own private world, coming to her father's store for provisions and even talking with her across the counter. It seemed as though she walked a littered gutter, in peril of touching with her garments unmentionable things.

And now his mind was upon her! He would spy! yes, and watch and search and ferret for the evil

secret which contained these three. He would do it as he would lay a cloak upon the mire for her to protect her garment hem. For Naomi promised rich fulfillment of his waiting. Nay, she was fulfillment in herself. To see her was reward; to be near her was a comfort.

"Naomi!" he breathed, and was exalted; because he loved her.

With skillful hands he saddled his brown mare, and, his fire slain, he was off upon one road; the only road for him. The road to fulfillment. He came there, cantering to the green grove outside her doorway. With a wordless pleasure, he saw her come out to greet him. He dismounted, and she came down from the doorway with her wide-eyed friendliness. Was there anything but friendliness there? Anything more? He searched her hazel eyes.

"I'm glad you've come back, Mr. Geoffrian," she said, and he took her hand with unthinking warmth. "Come along inside. You must stay to tea. Ralph—Mr. Gunlock is rambling about the clearing somewhere. It will be a party."

But he had looked upon her face and eyes and hair, her slim figure and her serene, boyish countenance. He sought there a corroboration of the insurgent emotion which now exalted him; and he found it. In the flesh she did not disillusion him. Her presence was desirable as her spirit, invoking within him a profound response to the attraction she unknowingly projected. This attraction in her was disassociated from such considerations of beauty, grace or

wit as had previously governed Geoffrian's estimate of womanhood, and thereby he felt his exultation to be sound. Naomi was not beautiful, she was lovely. Her grace was the unaffected carriage of free youth. The measure of her wit he could not know; indeed he could only know that the fact of her being was the solution to him of all perplexity, the answer to all the questions he had asked of life. He had looked upon her, discovered this miracle to be reality, and it was enough.

"No," he said, "I must get away. I only came—" He found he could not tell her why he had come. He had come to look upon her, that was all; but he could not tell her that. "I was out on the trail," he said, "and just dropped in."

"But you can stay a moment," said Naomi. She was gazing at him, admiring secretly the wide contours of his forehead and the straight glance of his eyes, which was not self-conscious, as her father's bearing was, and Gunlock's glances. That straight glance of his had attracted her from the moment she had first looked on Geoffrian. Secretly she had dwelt upon it, and had come to look for it with his every visit.

"No." he said. "not now."

"You mean you don't want to stay?" Surprised, she realized that she had spoken archly for the first time in her life, and she flushed.

"No, it isn't that." He frowned. "As a matter of fact I just wanted to see you for a moment. Just a moment in passing."

"Have you found the land you want yet?" she asked him.

"No. I'm afraid I haven't been searching very industriously."

She divined a certain indifference in his tone, and it disturbed her that he should face fortune with so cool an attitude.

"But you must!" she said. "You mustn't let dad's refusal set you back."

"I'm not so sure that my plans for a ranch you know—a hog ranch—are advisable." He regretted that, perceiving immediately that he had launched her upon the sea of his deception. "I'm going to drop it," he finished shortly.

Again she felt disturbed. Whether or not it is possible that the devotion and the love in his glance could in some degree have adduced a like emotion from her heart, she was conscious now of the vast importance to her that the potential splendor of Geoffrian's youth should not be wasted.

"What else then? What do you intend to do now?"

"Are you very interested in what I do?" he asked her.

"Everybody does something in the clearings."

"Yes," he said, "and I want to do something too. It would be fine to work on the land, I think. To clear it, and labor interminably at the farming . . . and then a man could write, or study."

"But it is hard labor. It's not every man who suc-

ceeds at it." And she was thinking that this man was like no other man she had met. Gunlock had set her examining herself, worrying herself with an eternal, cautionary question. By an alchemy she could not understand, this contact with Geoffrian turned all her worries toward him.

"You must be sure and choose something in which you will succeed," she urged him.

"That's a hard problem you present. If we could solve that no man would ever fail."

"But at least you can avoid the things which are impossible," she insisted.

"Do you mean that I am no man to succeed on the clearings? Do you think I'm too weak? Too irresolute?"

"Oh, no! no! Not that. But it needs experience. Skill. It really does. You've no idea how many fail just because they are ignorant. And you spoke of writing and studying. Men like that, men who like books and study, are not generally good farmers. That's what I mean."

"I see," he said. "Let me tell you then, Naomi, what can be learned from books. It can be learned that the pioneer who succeeds with his clearing is urged by an indomitable desire to make a home. He has it in his blood, perhaps, or perhaps the coming of a woman, of a mate, engenders it and demands it. He labors for her and his children and, as his love is strong, as the strength of his love for them urges him, so he will succeed. With that incentive, and with the woman helping him, a man can't fail in the work

of his home-making. Don't these people of the clearings bear me out in that?"

Swiftly she reviewed the history of a dozen achievements and a score of failures. She visited in her quick mind the homesteads of her world, and saw the sunlight which adorned them, the shadows which obscured them.

"But they know the life of the farm," she protested. "All of them have been born to that."

"Yet it didn't save some from failure. No, I think that I can succeed as well as they. I have discovered that there is no happiness or satisfaction to be had from any exertion which is not a means to that certain end. A man can make money in a variety of ways, but a home and wife and children is the only achievement which can bring the knowledge of complete success."

His gaze was very straight, and yet she did not flinch from it. She welcomed it rather, wondering how the world would seem without that clear, straight gaze for her.

"I think I should like to do that," he said. "I think that I can make my home in any place, cut it from any virgin forest, and dig a living from it, however difficult, with that in mind."

At these words she was filled with misgiving.

"You mean that you have a wife—outside?" Her breath was caught in her throat as by the shock of cold water.

"No," he said shortly, and felt an overwhelming and secret knowledge of an inevitable consummation.

THE RIVER TRAIL

He loved her, and in the depth of his love he felt confident that he would have her.

"Oh." Her response was unfathomable to them both.

Gunlock, emerging from the woods that fringed the river trail, approached them from leaf-obscured distances.

"Here's Ralph." A shadow flitted across her brow. "Come in and we'll have a tea party."

But he had no taste for Gunlock's company now. It was enough! He had seen her again, spoken with her again, and it was sufficient. Let Gunlock sit by the fire with her. He knew where his path must lie. His to free her world from the menace of unspeakable things. His to spy and, if need be, to strike.

"No," he said, "I must get away." And he turned to his horse again.

"Good night," he cried in a flood of exaltation. "Good night! Good night!" And he cantered away with his high spirit; his young, untried spirit; his devotion and his love.

Behind him she stood in the doorway, looking after the vanished rider. She knew very little of what lay beyond the confines of her father's acres, and classed most men as either good or bad, as whether they flaunted or subdued the predacious instinct in them. But her eyes had met the gray eyes of Geoffrian at that moment of parting with a shock that rocked her soul and gave her a sense of precarious happiness. He was so young, she argued, so well made and good to look upon. . . .

GEOFFRIAN'S JOB

"Come back!" she cried softly to the green road which had devoured him. "Come back again!" It was as though she cried out to something not human; something greater than anything in the short life she had known; something more essential than her body or her soul.

Gunlock, who had entered through the store, came to the doorway then and called her.

CHAPTER XIV

GEOFFRIAN FEARS THE WORST

"There is not very much I can tell you yet," Geoffrian had said. He had visited Corporal Scott, after the breakfast hour, and Scott had pierced the rag rug with a gaze bespeaking vast importance. Geoffrian recounted his efforts to make the acquaintance of the unspeakable three.

"They're bad ones, right enough," he had said. "Certainly they are killers, all three of them. Professional criminals I should say. The man Brade would be an out-and-out gunman; Mendlesohn a degenerate of the lowest human level; and the other fellow's a murderous idiot. What news do you get from outside? Any crimes in the cities, which would account for their hiding here?"

"Not a wor-rd." Grave deliberation. "You've been inside the house?"

"Not yet. They're suspicious. Of course that is a thing we must do. I'm keeping a close watch upon them, but they never leave the house unguarded. The idiot generally stays."

"We'll probably have to use some verra careful roose," Scott had suggested. "Get 'em out and search the place in their absence. That would be a wise thing."

"And there is the affair of Sansebeare's daughter. I don't know how Sansebeare feels about it, or what he knows, but the fact is that Mendlesohn has already seduced this girl, and it may develop into manslaughter if the father goes to the La Bret place to protest. They'd have thought nothing yesterday of knocking me on the head and dropping the body in the river."

Corporal Scott had nodded indefatigably. "Aye," he remarked profoundly. "Aye." Then he pointed his pipe at Geoffrian, deliberating. "But ye'll mind this. I've been approached by more than one," he said, "on this matter of Sansebeare's daughter. But 'Albrecht will not prosecute for his girl's name's sake. We can do nothing in the way of arrest."

They had argued the matter and deliberated upon it. They had decided that hereafter Scott should watch the house in the La Bret clearing from a concealment which Geoffrian could show him in the woods. Geoffrian would take the field when he could; and thereafter the place should be under constant surveillance. For the most part Geoffrian would ride free, ostensibly seeking a homestead, so that he could, if possible, fraternize with the unspeakable three and watch them openly.

From the exalted matter of spying, the talk had turned to what Scott enjoyed for idle gossip, but what to Geoffrian was precious information about a subject which possessed him.

"Ah, that Ruggles is a remarkable man," the Corporal had stated. "He would make a character for

a book." And he told of the unceasing war Ruggles had waged against the Hudson's Bay Company. more than an outlaw, a free trader was in those days. There was even a price upon the heads of them. although such things, mind ye, were never put in print." And young Ruggles had evaded every trap; every effort of the almighty Company to win him or extinguish him. "He was always a queer, vain creature. Tall, as he is now; black bearded, as he is now; and he was always to be seen with an Indian blanket. like a shawl, over his bare head. Gunlock's father remembered him, and Gunlock, too, if it comes to that, Gunlock's father was a company man; he had the trading post here at Marbrek before he died, and Gunlock spent his boyhood up the Leaping River, where Blanket Island post is to-day. They do say that while old Ruggles fought the company for the world to see, he did dirty work for them on the quiet."

"Now young Gunlock. There's an admir-rable man." And Scott was off on a new tack, delightful in the extreme to Geoffrian, who crossed his legs before the fire and watched the shrewd old N. C. O. reveling in his gossip.

"Gunlock, y'll mind, is a man of this country, but he saw little enough prospects for himself in the store where his father worked, or in the bigger store at Marbrek where his father was factor, almost; and the trail, I suspect, didn't please the lad either. I'm thinkin' he had no desire to be one of the lads on the company's hunting string, to hang his life on the

GEOFFRIAN FEARS THE WORST

thread of their par-r-ticular weaving. So he got out. He got out to Mexico, so his father had to say, and Ruggles can tell y' what the old man knew. Gold mines in Mexico, the boy was seeking, and not finding them, he followed the coast to the Yukon, which is where I first run into him."

The corporal fixed reminiscent eyes upon his boot toe, conjuring from it pictures of Yukon days.

"That was a bonny scramble for a man who loved the gowdies, and y'll do well to hear tell of how Steele. Strickland and Constantine made the red uniform of ours as good as judge, jury, army and the king's majesty in those queer days. Gunlock was there. I met him on the Dyea trail. A big boy he was, but quiet and unco masterful as he is to this day. In the Yukon he stayed till the gold-hungry laddies had filled their bellies with clouts o' cold parritch over long. He came here when his father died and turned into cold cash everything he could lay hand to. put his mother into that packin' box he himself lives in now, and was off to the states. Copper in Montana, says Ruggles, who had ways of knowing, y'll understand, old Mrs. Gunlock having borrowed siller Then oil, he says, in Tulsa State, or is it from him. a province only? 'Anyway ten years ago or more comes word he is unco rich in New Yor-rk City itself, and his mother gave out great tales of the figure he was in Wall Street, Fifth Avenue, and other centers of the oil and copper industr-ry. But it must have been blether, mostly, for back he comes just two years ago April, and not sweating gold, either, or I misjudge him. Not but what I misdoubt Harry Malcolm could tell a thing or two about his balance at the bank, for he bids fair to lay his hands on the whole entire province of Saskatchewan, just, the way he's buying land up."

Corporal Scott deliberately raised the boot which held his hypnotic gaze, as a man might slowly raise rare treasure trove, which, not having known it existed, he now profoundly doubted was in his hands. Firmly gripping his foot by its ankle, he drew it across his knee, where, with as great deliberation as had marked his discovery of it, he knocked his pipe sharply against the heel and sent a glowing ash fireward.

"He is a man with gr-reat energy," he concluded.

"Is he done with his fine plans, then?" asked Geoffrian; for he must know of this man Gunlock all he could. Gunlock, who stayed to tea!

"Oh, aye. That's another matter, just." Corporal Scott was not a man to give judgment touching another's credit, place in life, or plans for the future, without weighing his words carefully. Anthony Scott was no gossip, thought Anthony Scott. He merely dealt in the facts of the matter.

"He buys up land, as I have made plain to ye. Land hungry, the mannie is, and that is commonly known. They say he had his eye on the Ruggles place. Old Ruggles says little about affairs private to his per-rson, Mr. Geoffrian, and that is an honorrable thing; but he has let that much out. Though little enough chance has Gunlock's land hunger got

GEOFFRIAN FEARS THE WORST

in that direction. He might as well try to buy the old man's right arm or his head, either." And Scott chuckled. He was a humorous man, and full of such whimsicalities.

"But he persists," observed Geoffrian. "He still visits the old man, and tries to persuade him."

"Ah, now y' speak of another-r matter," remarked Scott darkly. "There are ways and ways to break a horse, Geoffrian, as you very well can under-rstand. Likewise there are ways and ways of getting your way with a man who had a daughter-r, y' ken a son-in-law may have for a gift what old Robin Gunlock's boy may not buy."

And Geoffrian stared into the fire, not starting, not giving expression to the shadow which blackened the fire's blaze before him. With fine unconcern he spoke; but the honest corporal did not know how nearly the casual words choked him.

"Oh, you think he-you think he-"

"Aye. He baits his hook for Ruggles' bit girlie. An' he has a good chance, there. A ver-ra good chance indeed, for the old men knew each other verra well." Scott nodded heavily at the brown boot toe, addressing it with severity. "Ye'll mind I said that old Ruggles was not at war with old Robin. Gunlock's father would have known of a thing or two about old Ruggles which would verra naturally bind him to the son."

Speechless, with dark thoughts darkly confirming hopeless aspects he had fought against believing, Geoffrian heard these things. And he was dumb, incapable even of moving his crossed legs. Dumb, staring at the fire.

"Well, I must be going," he said, and, invoking all his will, he arose.

There was something he must do, he remembered, as he stepped out into the morning sunlight. Some engagements for the day; and he walked toward the settlement like a man who, having dreamed deeply, is not yet aware he has awakened. Ah, yes! Luncheon with Malcolm; this was Thursday. Well, he would do it. Sometime his mind would begin to live again, but in the meantime he must pursue his ordinary duties

Now, why am I so disturbed over this matter? Surely a man need never fall in love and expect no rival? . . . But it was not fair! . . . The domination of her father; and he was an ally of Gunlock. . . . Anyway, she has no love for me . . . she doesn't love me. . . . Love me? She doesn't know I'm living. I'm only a bit of an idiot remittance man to her. But Gunlock is not the man for her. . . . That was it! . . . I mustn't let him marry her! . . . I mustn't, I mustn't . . . he is not the man . . . he is unworthy.

Now he was better; now he could think again; and there were hopes, high hopes; for Gunlock was not the man. It was absurd.

Geoffrian went to luncheon with the Malcolms and Naomi was there! He met her in the hallway where a yellow banister ran up a yellow stairway. She smiled brightly upon him, inconceivably glad, if he had but known it, because of his unlooked for presence. He was surprised that he could contain himself so well when he greeted her. He must speak with her about this matter, and speak with her soon, he reflected; he was amazed at his ability to control himself.

At luncheon they spoke of Toronto and the sister city, Montreal. Mrs. Malcolm decided that she liked Ottawa best because of the society there. "The official family makes for culture, you know," she said; and Geoffrian thought he had heard something of the sort before. In New York they had spoken like that of Paris. Parisians, he reflected must fall back on the Balkans. . . .

Malcolm asked whether he had ever run into a man named Redding whom he had known at Moose Jaw—a remittance man, he was. Geoffrian hadn't; but the talk turned to the risks of banking. Malcolm, weakly repenting, reminded Geoffrian that he was to come to the bank that afternoon and cash a draught. He regretted this immediately after he said it, but stuck to his guns.

"Of course you'll bring in some sort of identification," he said. "Just a formality."

"I'll be security for Mr. Geoffrian, if that's what you call it," laughed Naomi, and blushed rosily.

"You need do nothing more on my behalf than turn up unexpectedly at homes I'm to have luncheon in, as you did to-day," Geoffrian assured her.

So she told him that every Thursday brought her to the village to help Father Chapotin. "The little girls have a sewing class in the afternoon," she explained. "Sometimes Mrs. Malcolm lets me stay here Saturday nights, too. For early Mass on Sunday morning, you know."

Her voice so nearly worked his destruction as to bring an inane pleading to his lips.

"Let me ride back with you this evening," he begged her, and her hazel eyes widened with regret.

"But Mr. Gunlock is coming for me," she said.

"We must make up a picnic ride some afternoon," sailed in Mrs. Malcolm, with plump tactfulness. "You'll come, Naomi, and Ralph Gunlock; and we must get some young lady for Mr. Geoffrian." So the conversation got away from him.

After luncheon Malcolm captured him for a smoke. "A really good cigar," he explained. "I get them from Winnipeg," and Geoffrian could only go to the door with her, walking down the four steps to see her on her way to the mission.

With unexpected suddenness she turned back to him when she had all but started on her way.

"I thought," she said, with a quality of wistful shyness in her eyes, "I thought it would be nice . . . if you came out after luncheon to-morrow we could ride together for an hour. . . I have a trail to show you."

"Oh, splendid!" he blurted out, and they smiled adieus, neither of them speaking further.

He turned back to Malcolm's "den" with a strange elation. Why did she say that? Why? Why? 'And surely . . . or was he mistaken? . . . surely her voice had trembled ever so little, surely.

CHAPTER XV

NAOMI IN THE TOILS

At sunfall, Ruggles looked upon his daughter as she rode toward him through the long shadows of the clearing. Beside her rode Gunlock on his sable mare; a strikingly handsome figure, if one overlooked a certain heaviness, a certain darkness, which, touching the man's spirit, was apparent in his bearing despite the resolute beam upon his face. Ruggles, for one, overlooked it; and, with the folly of a wisdom bestowed and accepted by legend rather than by nature or acquirement, he overlooked also the shadow which that veiled sullenness would cast upon whatever Naomi, for inwoman Gunlock might espouse. stance; she seemed well enough inclined toward him. They made a good pair, riding together through the Thus Ruggles in the simple channels of his woods. mind.

The complacent old man and his daughter sat by the fire in the evening—he before a desk placed at right angles with the fire so that he could at once watch the moving decoration of the flame and be with his dockets which he had arranged in pigeonholes beside the fireplace. She sat in an armchair, well removed from the heat of the burning logs, and sewed by a lamplight that shone over her shoulder from a table behind.

Together they worked, carrying the familiar business of the day on to its nightly intermission.

It was not Ruggles' way to beat about the bush; also he was somewhat contemptuous of tact in his intercourse. But this matter which dwelt in his mind was not easy to propose. He arose and filed the docket with which he had been engaged, then, standing at the edge of the firelight, so that his face was obscured from the glare, he spoke in his dispassionate tenor voice. He spoke as the fates might speak, with a sound of destiny.

"Ralph Gunlock," he said, "has so often been in our house, and spent his time with us, that he is well nigh a member of the family. I look upon him almost as if he was a son."

"Yes." Naomi laid her sewing on the table and turned to the dim figure in the half light. "Ralph is almost one of the family."

"You like to see him often?" It was not so difficult a matter after all, he reflected. He knew what next to say. He felt fairly sure of his ground now.

"Well, we haven't much company out here, have we?" she answered.

Then he said it: "Because I think it is time you and he were wedded."

She looked up quickly, placing her hands on the arms of her chair as though she would rise; but she sank back again, and stared into the fire, seeking a weapon for defense.

He moved forward with a grave smile upon his face and looked down upon her, confidently. "It would be a good thing," he pursued. "It will be the best thing. Ralph is a part of this country, like you and I. You know him as you know no other man but me. You know my plans, too; for the woods and . . . and the business. You know my methods. Ralph will fall into them as no other man could do. I can trust him as I can trust no other man. It will be a good thing. I will tell him tomorrow that the marriage will be acceptable to me."

"But I cannot do it like this, with so little thought!" she cried, and what was in her voice penetrated the thick wall of complacency which bound his soul.

"Naomi," he still spoke without emotion, without doubt, as the fates must speak, "are you thinking of any other man?"

What could she say? It was not a surprise to her that her father had made these plans. In her short space of womanhood she had known no other man than Ralph Gunlock who might be her husband; and the prospect had not been displeasing to her. She had enjoyed his companionship and now remembered when she had looked forward to his coming. A week ago, with guileless sophistication, she had anticipated just such a proposal as this; and now it had fallen upon her like a blow.

The fact is that scarcely a short twenty-four hours before she had discovered, for the first time in her life, what love was. But that was all. A swift exaltation of the spirit, an uplifting of the soul—beyond the soul. But that was all; Geoffrian was a stranger to her as he was to Marbrek. She could not say that

she loved him as a man; she only knew that his presence had awakened love in her. She, who had known nothing of love, knew now that, possessing it, she could not understand it. And as for her father's question, she knew that she had no answer for it.

"But you will give me some time?" she said.

"I have given you time," he answered. "It is natural, of course, that you should feel undecided about it. But so you will to-morrow, and so you would a month from now. This matter of marrying a man is only one of decision. I have noticed your way with Gunlock, and know that you like him well enough. You have encouraged him; and, as a matter of fact, he is the only man who can consummate our plans of living. Besides, he has courted you too long for us to very well refuse him. A refusal, if such a thing was to be thought of, should have been given long ago. Months ago."

He seated himself in a small chair close to her, and his impassive, bearded face, his bright eyes, seemed to possess a power which held her silent.

"He has spoken with me about this several times," he said, "and I have considered it often. I believe that no finer opportunity can possibly come to you, and so I have decided to consent. I am sure that your marriage will be a very successful arrangement."

Why did not the words come to her now? Why could she not speak? Why could she never speak when this man, her father, fixed his eyes upon her? He held her dumb and took the life out of her when

he ordained things in this manner. It was as though he were, indeed, her very destiny; to order her being and arrange the movements of her self.

"Father!" she cried with a sharp, unnatural note. "What are you saying? Father! Oh, don't! Oh, don't!"

This, he decided, was hysteria, and he spoke to her with an even voice, and even, commanding eyes.

"You mustn't let it upset you, Naomi," he said. "Of course it is not a usual thing, but our lives must face these great encounters with firmness. You can't know how much thought I've given to this, and how important your happiness is to me. Love, of course, will come after. Love is a matter of living together. You cannot know anything about love till after you are married."

"But my heart!" she stammered. "How can I know what is in my heart? I have had no time!" Oh why could she not stand up and fight with this man for the thing she yearned for in her soul? But she could not. She could not know even what it was for which she yearned.

"That is enough, Naomi," pronounced her father. "I wanted to let you know what my plans were, and what my arrangements will be with Ralph. I wish that I could speak with you more tenderly and more—lovingly about it, but you must try to understand that I feel what I cannot put into words." In this he was sincere. God knows he was not committing this abomination with malice. He laid his hand upon the girl's arm and, with her wide eyes upon his, she

did not move. "I love you very deeply, Naomi. You are all I have, and I have made these plans for your happiness. . . . happiness. That is true. You will become accustomed to the idea gradually. Of course every girl is upset at first."

"Of course," she said, because she knew that something must be said. "I think I will go to bed now. I feel a little upset. It is natural."

But why should she? Why should the thought of this upset her? She had entertained it as a hope at one time; not earlier than a week ago she had thought of it, and it had not displeased her then. Only she remembered the departing figure of Geoffrian; his young, erect figure. She remembered calling after him: "Come back." And the beat of his horse's hoofs subdued in the evening. She remembered that her heart had been flooded strangely, and that, turning back to the house again, she had felt a happiness she had not known before.

Then she knew that she loved him. Geoffrian only she loved and, if she never was to see him again, she would yet love him always. She loved this stranger blindly, and that lifted up her heart and soul. But she must marry Gunlock, and that was desolation, bitterness, a thing for deepest sorrow.

In the darkness of her room she wept for her beloved, and experienced the first dread knowledge of what a little thing death is.

CHAPTER XVI

AN INDISCREET VISIT

She wept because she knew that love had come too late and, while she lay in her bedroom weeping, Jimmy Mendelsohn, at the La Bret place, received verbal castigation wrapped in velvet.

"We ain't so well fixed but what our health can be right seriously interfered with mos' anytime," murmured Dakota to the recalcitrant mud puppy. "You didn't oughter go raisin' any dust, Jimmy." His pale blue eyes reflected the kerosene lamplight like dirty moonstone in the afterglow, and the lean dust-colored face of the man was an impassive menace, contemptuously ignoring the probability of inciting anger.

Dakota Dan Brade was a reversion to ancestral type. The son of a teamster in Oklahoma City, he had inherited the restless soul of a grandfather who died with his boots on. In a preceding generation he would have held a position of respected authority in the cattle country. His sense of the power to kill—which is not a common perquisite among sane men—had been wasted, however, in the reputable level of the world he walked in. So he sold out his talents in the underworld. It was not that he desired to kill so much as that he could kill without compunction, a gift of which he was notably proud. So, beginning

in lesser affairs of the range, where such a man as he was often "right handy" to a rancher who coveted his neighbor's cattle, Dakota had graduated into the metropolitan ranks with the growth of Oklahoma City and Tulsa, where such gangsters were politically useful and gained a certain immunity thereby. Because of a clear-headed ruthlessness and a peculiar atmosphere which attached to his deathlike countenance, he had soon become able to command his own price for murder, and had at the same time established a tremendous prestige among others of his kind. Thus, in the presence of Jimmy Mendlesohn and Buck Tanner, he was notably the superior man.

"It ain't in no way right," he set forth silkily, "that we all are kept slouching about here this away; and we're a long ways orf from the places where we know just how we stand. But that we can parley on when he comes 'round to parley. Meantime, you, Jimmy, didn't oughter go raisin' hell this yere way. I want to say that you ain't goin' ter raise no more hell, neither."

Blue profanity from Jimmy Mendelsohn.

"But she jus' fell like a baby doll," he protested.

"It don't make no difference. Yo' all had lots o' time to know me right well befo' we left Tulsa, Jim, an' you know what I say goes. You got ter leave this French Cannuck dame be. From now on." There was finality in his tone, and Jimmy knew it.

Jimmy was bred of the gutter. A degenerate type peculiar to the slums of the larger cities, he had drifted to Oklahoma for his "health." It was a part

of the larger irony of life that this vicious excrement of a society which pretended he did not exist, and employed an army of police to see that it was not reminded that he did, should have fallen under the fascination of the virile west as personified in the dregs of Oklahoma City. Jimmy, in those lucid moments when necessary opiates did not becloud his brain, must have known, however vaguely, that his wretched life was a precarious and not particularly desirable thing. Yet he was afraid of this western gunman, because Dakota symbolized for him the desperado of the free range and the open cattle run; a hair-trigger man who could deal death as death could not be dealt in Jimmy's native alleys; romantically, manfully.

"A guy can't lay around and rot," he mourned. And at that moment Gunlock whistled outside so that he could safely enter.

He had come by stealth, disgusted with the circumstances that obliged him to secrete his sable mount in shadowed thickets and skulk across open places among the weaker animals of the night. So, entering the squalid room, he the more eagerly and ferociously assumed the attitude of lion, wolf, or whatever kingly beast he thought appropriate to the rôle he chose to take before these blackguards.

He was forceful now, and predominant.

"It's a damned shame that I should have to come out here again!" he said, and there was no prepossessing beam upon his face. His hard eyes glinted with all their potential ferocity. His vigorous voice, pitched low, carried an undeniable threat. He was

the bullying, overbearing commander now, and his three hearers knew it.

"You're sticking your heads in the noose!" he snarled, "and my head, too."

Jimmy offered profane propitiation.

"It's your filthy lechery!" Gunlock shot at him, snapping his under jaw forward. "You're not down in Tulsa now. We've got to do things decently up here. I told you when you came, Brade, to lay low until you did what I brought you for. That's your only chance. If you do that, you can pull off the shooting, and get away before these damned backwoodsmen know what's happened. . . . Twenty-four hour's start will get you out of danger if you follow the route I've given you. . . . But you must let this degenerate loose in the clearings; and do you know what's happened? They've asked the police to keep an eye on you! No knowing what'll happen if the mounted police wake up. Luckily Scott isn't the most brilliant kind."

"Now that's just what I've been calc'latin' to sort of reason out with you, Mr. Gunlock," murmured Dakota, and, noticeably, the menace fell from him like a cloak, before the dominance of the bigger man.

"You got a job for us to do. Kill orf this yere Ruggles, because for reasons of your own you want him killed orf. All right. I come up here like you says, with two picked men . . . real good men, too, for the job, and then you says, 'lay low.' Now that's right ill judged, Mr. Gunlock, because Jim, here, and Buck, they ain't used to layin' round in

country places. W'at I'd ask, is, do yo' want this killin' done, or don't yo'? 'Cause it's gettin' right late to pull the job now, Mr. Gunlock. We all have got to think of our get-away."

"Your get-away's all right. Just get down to La Pas as I've told you, and the rest is easy. If you'll lay low, you should be able to get a good twenty-four hour's start after the shooting." It was plain that Gunlock felt the strain of his position. Sweat beaded his forehead and his upper lip. "Stay away from me, though; and the women. You'll ruin us yet!"

He looked upon the three of them, his lower jaw forward in an ugly, heavy contortion, his upper lip writhing upon his teeth.

"I'll tell you, Brade; as things stand now, there's a chance we may get away without it. I can't tell you of my plans," he frowned at them, pondering, "but I may be able to get what I want without killing the old man after all. That's why I've held you off. Just a day or two, just a little while, and we may be able to call it off. I hope so!"

Yes, his nerves were feeling it, the narrowed eyes of Brade saw that, and in his seared heart he sneered.

"But you all ain't overlookin' how we've come up here," he murmured.

"No. No, you'll get your price all right, and, mind you, I may want the job done yet. But lay low, see." He rose in his might, remembering Jimmy's folly. "If you fellows double cross me with your rotten filthiness, I'll hang the lot of you. Bear that in mind. You know I can do it. I'm your mas-

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ter while you're in Canada, you know!" And sure enough they knew it. He had a curb upon them, and they knew it. With a cold and ominous admonition he left them, and skulked like a hunted animal to his horse beside the hillock on the river bank.

Geoffrian, on watch at the river trail, saw him emerge from the clearing, as he had seen him enter it; as he had heard the whistle, and had seen the door open at Gunlock's coming; as he had seen it open once more for his going and, mysteriously, in the way of distant doors at nighttime, close behind him.

Gunlock rode swiftly back to Marbrek, and did not know that far behind him rode Geoffrian, more slowly, thinking deeply.

CHAPTER XVII

LOVE WILL OUT

They were removed from all the human world, with a woodland springtime enfolding them. They were upon a hill commanding three sweeps of the river, and the forest of the far shores, dwarfed and exquisite, in the distance. The sky hung like a blue curtain over the profuse green draperies about them, and the torrid air was filled with bird-song and a myriad native noises. And he was far from his subject yet.

They had spoken of this matter and that matter, of people, horses, and adventures. She had spoken, timidly, of himself.

"And how have your plans proceeded?" she had asked. "I should think that with thoughts like those [he had expanded upon the possibilities of the illimitable forests] that you would have some very good plans indeed."

He found that to her he couldn't carry on the lie his mission made necessary. "Yes," he said. "I have a certain work to do. After that I shall do as I have told you. I shall take a homestead."

"But don't you think it would be better for you to take up some job first. Any sort of work, so that you could study the country before you go in for such a thing? So many men come from the outside and fail."

"But if it is gone into seriously?" he urged. "Don't you think it must be gone into seriously? For me it would mean the making of a home."

"That's just it," she said. "It would be a serious thing for you to work on the land before you started with your own enterprise. Or some go into the police. Dad says a man can get a very fine insight into this country through the police." As a matter of fact she liked the picture she could conjure in her mind of Geoffrian in the scarlet uniform.

He had extolled upon the inutility of life in the mounted police, but not heartily, for he felt the implied untruth.

Then they had come to this hill, and he was pleased when he saw her young body erect on the bounding pony as it took the rise before him. saw her with all the beauty of the northern forest for a background, and the river valley lying outspread below. At the same time he remembered reading what a missionary had written of a little Syrian town, and the admirable women of the mission playing with the children in the sunlight. enchanting picture of clean beauty under a calm heaven just twenty-four hours before the Turks rode down upon it to slay and ravish. The same impulsion to prevent this hideous and abominable occurrence, that had arisen within him then, seized upon him now. In clean beauty Naomi rode in the forest and to-morrow Gunlock, linked in a dark manner

with the unutterable bestiality of the La Bret gang, was to descend upon her, desiring her person as a key to gain.

The hill fell steeply away at the feet of her piebald pony, and a hundred feet below was a sea of green forest flecked with blossoms. The air was hot. so that in the narrow, walled trails, which they had followed, it had closed about them like a tangible cloak, stifling in its density. On the hilltop, however, they had emerged upon an open, rock-floored space, where a breeze disturbed the girl's hair and the profuse foliage of the silver birches which walled the clearing. And there were no mosquitoes there a welcome respite.

"Isn't this a fine mountain top?" she exulted. a mountain to me, because it gives me a place above the world, and shows how beautiful the country is we live in! Look how it goes on and on. The gentle waves of the hills, and all forest; filled with live It goes on forever." things.

"And the river," he reminded her. "The river will take you to the lake; and the lake to the portage; and so on to the Saskatchewan and cities and railways and the outside. It's a marvelous thing, you know, but this world you're looking on from your mountain top is the same tiny world you can look on from the Eiffel Tower or St. Peter's at Rome."

She turned her wide eyes to him, seeming unable to decide upon the intention of his words.

"Oh, no," she said. "Don't you know that the

world we live in is all our own? A woman from Rome would be as strange here as I should be in Mars. And ours is a bigger world than the world of the Pope at Rome."

"That seems to be the accepted thing to say about the forests of the northwest," he reflected. "They are big and illimitable—to our limitations, anyhow—and yet there are more various human beings housed within the Vatican, or in one skyscraper of New York, than in all Marbrek and its clearings. The north is a big place because it is a solitary place; but because it is a solitary place, it is a very little place indeed. You see we judge these matters by the standards of human beings. Even in cathedrals we are human; and the far-famed forest aisles shadow heresies as dark as any under the pillars of St. Marks."

"I don't think that I can understand all that," she said. "But I do know that the bigness—the vastness—of the world I can see from this hilltop must absorb a great many unpleasant things which would be intolerable in a great city. I can be happy on this hilltop, even if there are unhappy things to face in my life below; and it is a good thing to find a refuge from unhappiness. Does the Vatican have that advantage? Or the skyscraper of New York? Or the cathedrals you have spoken of?"

"I think," he said, "that this is a proper time and place to argue such a question thoroughly," and he dismounted. She was off and at her pony's bridle before he could approach to help her, and, the

horses made fast, they stood upon the rocky floor of the hilltop.

"You said that upon this hilltop you could lose unhappiness, and I don't think you meant what you said. For unhappiness is a disease which afflicts the spirit and cannot be cured until the germ that causes it is dead or gone its way. Because your hilltop has a magic in it to conjure away the pain of your unhappiness for a space, it does not argue that the unhappiness is gone. You know it lives in your heart, even while you look upon the hills. It will only depart when the germ of circumstance, which causes it, has departed."

For her part, she was standing erect at the edge of the rock, contemplating the scene below. Now she turned and came to seat herself upon a mossy bank, pedestal for a fast-decaying stump.

"You talk like a doctor," she said, her eyes far off. "Are you a doctor for such diseases as unhappiness?" He pondered a moment.

"No," he said shortly. He was seeking words for this golden opportunity.

"I only know a loneliness, which is very like unhappiness but not the same. For loneliness has a certain satisfaction—the knowledge that either fulfillment or disappointment must bring an end to it. I, too, can come to such open places as this. I can feel the vastness of the forest and catch the exaltation of a sunset or a breeze. As a matter of fact, I can feel the loveliness of nature as almost like the appeal of a lovely woman; and it has called me, when I have

been away from it, as all womanhood calls mankind from his castles and his labors building them."

He paused, looking upon her, seeking articulation.

"There is a loneliness for me in that call which I cannot describe to you; but, answering it, I reap no satisfaction. A feast of beauty fills my mind and a pleasure comparable only to pain. Yet I am not satisfied."

He stood before her as her father had stood the day before; but he was not dominant. He merely spoke to her of matters which, he felt, she alone was destined to hear from him; and, for her part, this experience was among the things she had lived for.

"That sense of pleasure which I have derived from the beautiful moments of my life has always fallen short of happiness," he was saying, "because it has always fallen short of fulfillment. It has only gone so far as to suggest a satisfaction greater than the mere contemplation of beauty can provide. I have scrambled about through life like a fervent sparrow seeking for Nirvana, always anticipating the moment which will bring me to contentment. Can you understand?"

She knew well enough what was burning in his heart. She knew that he was circling about the central theme of love, striving for the moment to light upon it, as the bright birds of the river bank circle above their catch. But she could not break the tortuous pathway of his words. She had never heard

a man speak like this before. And now he spoke gently.

"And I have lived for it," he said. "I cannot tell you how tangible, how real a thing, this anticipation has been to me. I have said to myself: 'It is waiting for me somewhere. If I live for it, it will some day come to me.'

"And I have lived for it, Naomi! I have lived for you through years and years. For you are the fulfillment after loneliness, and doubt, and all the thousand devils which tear at the life of a man!"

He was on the dry green earth beside her; his hands searched for hers, and capturing them, drew them to his lips. Yet she could not speak. She could only know that love had come too late, and that she dared not say.

On his knees he still held her hands in his, and drew closer, seeking her lowered face.

"I know!" he cried. "I know! Gunlock wants you; but you can't do it, Naomi! You can't. Because it has been written down that you and I were to come together on this hilltop. Naomi! Doesn't that mean anything to you? Haven't you felt it, too? Put Gunlock out of your mind, for we were made together!"

She lifted up her head, and gazed with her wondering, hazel eyes tear filled. There was a note of motherhood and gentle understanding in her voice, and her fingers touched his hair.

"I can only say that you have come too late," she said. "I don't know who you are. I do not even

know your name. I believe that what you said is right. I believe that we were made for one another, because I love you. My love for you is the only love I have ever known, so I know it for what it is. I love you."

She breathed deeply, so that, exhaling the breath, she sighed. A suspicion of a sob was in the sigh.

"Then, Naomi—" he cried; but her quiet voice, compassionate and replete with resignation, silenced him.

"It is too late," she said. "My love has come too late. Two—three weeks before and it would have been all right. You would have entered into my life. As it is there are stronger forces which have surrounded me and bound me in since I was a child. They are a part of my life and myself. It is a fence around me. You are outside that fence and I cannot break it. So you have come too late. I am to marry Mr. Gunlock. It is decided. I am to marry him."

"No!" he leapt to his feet. "No!" he shouted; but her face, with the shadow upon it, silenced him. There was inarticulate pleading in her eyes.

"That is all I can tell you now," she continued. "All I can say. I haven't any words to deal with these queer, unknown things, like you have. That is all I can say to you now."

Bravely she looked into his face, directly into his gray eyes.

"We can't very well ride on together now, can we?" She did not smile, for his eyes hurt her more

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than the pain which they reflected could hurt him.

"Oh, it isn't as though we hadn't known what love is!" she burst out; and then, faltering. "I am sorry.

—I am sorry for you. Really."

Which was the most potent dismissal she could have uttered, for, with it, he turned to his horse and rode from the hilltop with only a word for her.

"Again!" was all she heard, and she awakened then to cry out to the quiet air—cry out in despair and futile protest against the incomprehensible forces which possessed her.

And Geoffrian, on the river trail, rode with tremendous elation. She loved him! It was all he desired, all he cared to know. She loved him and he would have her, despite Gunlock, despite his dark entanglements, despite her father, despite the world! She loved him; he would have her!

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CHAPTER XVIII

CHIEFLY FROM THE FRENCH OF ALBRECHT SANSEBEARE

In the great heat that afflicted these spring days, there was little for a trapper to do but bask in some shadowed spot and smoke a philosophical pipe; contemplating perhaps the hard lot of those ill-advised members of the profession who had taken to the clearings. In winter it was sometimes a matter for self-pity that one had to follow the trap lines in the face of a driving wind, while the farmers sat by their fires with nothing whatever to do. But in these days, when the hot breath of summer came overhastily to fill the air with mosquitoes and the days with perspiring discomfort, the full advantage of the winter trails was vouchsafed and its inestimable benefits made manifest.

"In wintair you can leafe de col' outsides to entair into de warm cabeen," remarked Jean Girardeau complacently on these hot afternoons. "An' de fire, 'ow warm, 'ow great cumfairt ees to be 'ave by de red 'ot stov. Bot in de summair, w'ere do you go den? eh? Into w'at plass can you go an' avoid de 'ot weddair an' de mosskeeto? eh?"

Especially he liked to debate these matters with 'Albrecht Sansebeare, because the morose Belgian, his

bedraggled mustache awag, turned the trapper's badinage to solicitude with a deft touch all his own.

"Dat ees right. Yes, you are right, Jean Girar-deau," he would say, and lapse into his unspeakable French, to the other's keen enjoyment.

"We sweat in the spring and summer on our clearings—myself and Tyl have moved thirty or fifty trees, great fellows, since the thaw, and what reward do we get? A winter stuffed up indoors. We don't get out into the woods like you do. You see the world, Jean; but us, we see only the sides of our sheds. You have the cream of the world, Jean; you fellows who live out in the woods like an Indian. Oh, I have something of the gypsy blood in me, I can tell you! Here in the clearings we are overcivilized."

"Yes." Jean would assent very gravely, but hugely delighted nevertheless; and he would kick viciously at Petibon, who was a dog without manners and without adequate food, poor wretch, in the summer season. "It is like Quebec or Edmonton about here, although for myself I like to come down to such civilized parts for a little bit. Now and then."

"But it has so changed," Albrecht would deplore. "You know I came with the furniture. But it was not like this then. Then you could tell who your neighbors would be, who you would meet at the settlement on a Saturday evening."

He referred to a period fourteen years before when Ruggles, deciding that his tiny daughter should develop amid surroundings which no grand dame of

Montreal could envy, had sent thither for an entire equipment of fine furniture, rugs, draperies and To bring these treasures to his cabin, he tableware. had, as has been set forth before, caused a road to be cut and corduroyed where only a trail had been. Thus he had opened the way to Marbrek; to Parrot, Malcolm, and such enterprising men. Thus he had opened the way for Gunlock, and for the sequence of events which was to bring Dakota and his companions at Gunlock's call. Thus, cutting and grading and toiling, Sansebeare had come "with the furniture," and, settling down with several of his fellows upon land bestowed by Ruggles' legendary munificence, his family had followed him and his clearing had begun.

In feudalwise, following a predisposition which sounded back to ancient experience, Sansebeare had attached himself to Ruggles, fitting into the legend with exactness. He had, indeed, become a part of it.

On this particular evening he was deeply worried. His placid discontent veiled a perturbation which was nevertheless apparent upon his weak, subservient countenance. Girardeau had comiserated him upon the still, oppressive heat, but he had not arisen to the fond topic of discontent with his usual spirit.

"Yes," he had assented, "it is very hot. Ten days since the last rain."

"The good God help you fellows on the clearings if the woods should burn," Jean had urged.

"God help us all!" Albrecht had replied, careful

these days to tread out the ashes of his pipe. But he spoke without interest or particular piety. "It is hot for May."

"For June," corrected Jean.

"June," assented Albrecht meekly. "Ah, it is you men of the forest who know how to enjoy this country. For me, now, a flatter place would be good, or this place, for the soil is good enough; but these trees! It is a man's life to clear away the trees. You, now, find the trees as good shelter, and a place to hunt in, which is good for business."

"You must be careful, my friend," warned Jean, the careless, the debonair. "The good God does not love a discontented man. And surely now that Tyl and Joos are such great fellows, your land must have a value, your clearing must be of the best."

Sansebeare waggled his mustache dolefully.

"That," he said, "is as it may be. But Jean, this country is not as it was. Since those days when I came here—came here with the furniture—for that is the time when I came into this country, Jean; since then the times have changed, and it is not the same." He leaned forward in the chair he had taken, and spoke morosely. There was a hint of something sinister behind his pale brown eyes, if anything so dull as this peasant's clayish soul could be so called. "There is a foul man in that settlement of Marbrek. Ah! He is not worthy of my spittle!"

And Jean drew back his head, pop-eyed, because he had not heard this Fleming speak so passionately before. "Ho!" he remarked. He was dazed, and curious as well. He stared at his excited companion with interest.

"He has come from God knows where!" cried Sansebeare. "He has come into this place like a serpent! like slime! like. . . . Oh, my God! Is it not shameful that such a man should come into this place like this! He has betrayed my daughter!"

All this without warning. A passionate outburst from pitiable clay. Sansebeare was a wronged man, because he knew that it was the manly thing for him to feel thus wronged. If his wife had been alive, he would have blamed this catastrophe upon her, beaten his daughter, and dismissed the matter therewith, holding his head aloft among his fellow men. He did not know this, however, and in the existing circumstances felt that there was but one thing to do. He must feel injured; he must have vindication. It was an essential part of the tragedy thus introduced that the dullness of his being was the dullness of a brute and, the brute having been hurt, was now enraged.

"Ho!" remarked Jean, inordinately interested now, but properly sympathetic, too. These things must be carried off properly. "Who is this? How do you know these things? Have you any proof of it?"

"Jean, you are my friend," said Albrecht, nicely dramatic, but sincere enough in his way. "She is my daughter, you know. And this man has wronged her. He is slime! I found out about it. . . . It has been going on for a long time—days. I told Ruggles

about it—his daughter. Would she help me? After all I have done for him? No! I tell you I do not give one hell dam for this man Ruggles. He is a cold man. He did not drive this Mendlesohn away—that is the name of the scum who did this thing.

. . . His girl—Naomi Ruggles—Miss Ruggles—she spoke to my Rosalie, but that was nothing to do. He should have driven the man Mendlesohn away.

. . . Now should he not have driven him away? . . .

"Ho!" Jean made various noncommital gestures with his head.

"Ho!" He said.

"That is how I found it out," concluded Sansebeare, lucidly.

"But that," protested Jean Girardeau, "that is nothing. You must have more to go upon than that." You will observe with what tact he ignored the incoherence of the other. This was a tidbit worth some pains to secure. "What! Have you no evidence conclusive?"

"Have I not told you?" cried Sansebeare. "Is it not enough? She had been going with this Mendlesohn for many evenings. Two. I protested with her, and by the eyes of the girl, I knew that she was not saying the truth when she replied to me. So on Sunday she would not go to the Mass . . . to the confession . . . and I said 'Why is this, Rosalie? . . . Why do you not go with your father and your brothers to the chapel?" . . . You see I knew that she was not being truthful with me . . . and

she stood there and told me more lies. stood near the door, and Tyl stood outside the door. Here, like I am standing. . . . He had in his hand that stick he always carries since last November when he picked it from the trail at Lost River Landing . . . You know? . . . many times spoken to him about that foolish stick . . . it is not a thing that a man carries to the church on Sunday. . . . And he stood there with the stick like I am standing here. So she looked at us like we were strangers to her . . . and lied. . . . So I took the stick from Tyl, and beat her across the legs. Hard, I beat her. And Joos said: 'That is not a good thing to do on the Sabbath,' and he would have stopped me, but Tyl said: 'No. She is telling us lies.' So I beat her, and she did not make a noise; but she said to me: 'Stop beating me, and I will tell you why I cannot go to the confession. have been with this man Mendlesohn.' Like that . . . and she was not ashamed, but she said that she loved him. . . . This Mendlesohn! This dung! . . . My girl!"

He pursed up his lips, and forgot his self-pity a little in his very real indignation and anger. It seemed that his boys had not been properly impressed by the conventional demands of the occasion. They had been sobered, it is true, by the sudden infliction upon their own womanfolk of an affront they had themselves essayed further afield; but they vaguely assured themselves that in such matters the woman is most to blame, and failed to nourish a proper re-

sentment against the perpetrator of the outrage. "Louts," their father had described them. "But they are too young," he explained to Jean. For himself this was a thing he could not forget nor forgive. "I must punish that man," he confided, darkly.

"Will you tell this to the Corporal Scott?" asked Jean; and Sansebeare arose with the dignity of a wounded freeman.

"To have my daughter spoken of over three provinces?" he rasped. "And they would enter her name in the records they make of such things. No. . . . I myself have some courage, Jean, some power. I tell you that Mendlesohn has played with a dangerous customer. I shall kill that Mendlesohn, you see."

Jean's eyebrows expressed an honest doubt, and he studied Albrecht curiously.

"If you kill him," he temporized slowly, "they will hang you, Sansebeare. The game is not worth that much. Rosalie would not be so well off. Eh?"

Black depression followed swiftly upon Sansebeare's proud glow which departed with Jean's carefully considered words.

"Yes," he said, waggling furiously his mustache. But the anger of the brute was in his breast. "Yes. That is it. And I do not wish to be hung. But it is that I must see him punished. You know he laughs at me. I, who have never seen him. He laughs at me. I know it. I feel it. . . . Here!" He pounded his chest. "A father is not supposed to permit that such slime comes to use his daughter like any dog—and laugh at him? . . . I will kill him."

This interested Jean. Alert and sensitive with a Gallic delicacy of perception to such passions as now burned in the man before him, he discerned the dull anger and the potential menace in the hurt of his ridiculous companion. What is more, Jean Girardeau possessed a tender heart for tender periods; and he did not like to think of this worthy farmer, with his land well nigh made into a comfortable livelihood, his boys and his girl, with a probable but unsanctioned grandchild, going to the gallows. A baby for a girl like Rosalie? What was that? She was a good girl, and a strong one. A year, two years, and its fatherhood would be only a memory. She would marry. So he advised the perturbed Sansebeare.

"Give a little time," he counseled, "and this man will hang himself. He is here for no good, my Albrecht. He can be nowhere for good. I have met him and his two friends, and they are bad ones. Sometime the police will be looking for this man, and at such a time the man who brings him into Marbrek will not be blamed if the prisoner has a bullet through his head. That would probably be a necessary thing. Wait, Albrecht, for that time. When the police want this son of the devil, then you can have your way with him. . . ."

And so on, while the hot sun fell, trying to pierce that dull mind with counsel; trying to save that dim, earthy life from the witless anger which moved it toward destruction. That life which, however dim, however earthy, was to Albrecht Sansebeare

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so well worth living, so worthy of its hard won rewards.

He listened to the voice of Jean with pitiful dignity and, his morose mustache quivering with his emotion, grumbled in reply about the heat and the coming dinner hour. Outwardly a thing of clay, inwardly he felt the reason of Jean's well-meant words; they came to him not so much as sound reason but as an excuse. He was in a sense relieved that he could bide his time and hold his head up, too. But Jean had not misjudged the intensity of his purpose.

"Yes," he said finally. "Yes, it would be a good thing to wait a little while." And he plodded back to his clearing, to his louts of boys, to his ill-used Rosalie. She was his daughter, and he never spoke again to her of what was in his mind.

"Some day," he reminded himself, broodingly, "I shall kill that man." But he would bide his time.



CHAPTER XIX

GUNLOCK SEES HIS WAY

Gunlock arose from the table in great displeasure and turned a blunt shoulder to his mother's startled, disconcerted smile. It was her way to be sweet and playful, cheerful with a never-flagging cheeriness in the face of tragedy itself. In this manner she derived satisfaction from whatever circumstance might be; snubbed, she was a cheerful martyr; triumphant, she was cheerfully conscious of it; and infallibly cheerful, she was an incurable sentimentalist.

With cheerful pathos she had enlarged at luncheon on the fate of those mothers deserted in their declining widowhood by such staffs and rocks of their later years who selfishly married and left them.

"It's a great comfort to me, Ralph," she had smiled meltingly. "to have you, and I appreciate it. I appreciate your devotion, now that you have grown up. I do." This was her cheerful manner of letting him know that she was aware of his designs upon Naomi Ruggles, and that it wouldn't do.

But the opinion of this sentimental woman had little weight in Gunlock's plans. He would make the dutiful gestures of a loving son toward her as long as he lived, for his own sentimental nature responded easily to the parental fallacy. But she must

not intrude her fatuous smile into the plans of his life. So he arose from the table in great displeasure and made a cheerful martyr of her then and there.

Alone he strode largely up and down his mother's living room. His displeasure, which had risen quickly, had as quickly died. Ruggles, indeed, had taken displeasure out of Gunlock's life. By a few words, an evening's talk, he had made Gunlock's way clear.

Gunlock played a precarious game. Some would call it a desperate game, but that was romantic. Still it was a game to be played with a firm and relentless hand, no doubt of that. It was a great deal to have the path cleared as Ruggles had cleared it. Just a careful gathering up of loose ends, now; a firm, relentless disposal of Dorothy; and no man on earth would be his better. A firm, relentless hand, that was all—and it was all so easy now.

Suiting the gesture to the thought, Gunlock drew one great hand into a massive fist and held it rigidly before him, surveying it with grim jaw and hard, glinting eyes. He was an ambitious man, and he had something to retrieve.

"Little enough money he seems to have now," Scott had said. And Scott was right. Gunlock had won his fortune, and had lost it.

He had traveled in the front ranks of the fortune hunters since his boyhood. He had hunted for it, and been baffled in the hunting. But he had learned, Gunlock had. His soul was dedicated to the end of becoming among the great and powerful of the world. So he had learned. He had studied the men who won with a bold and uncolored concentration which revealed to him their every trick and mannerism. He had studied the men who lost with a dispassionate analysis that made him master of their every weakness. And, pursuing his hungry pilgrimage, he had found his pot of gold.

To many men that fortunate plunge into the oil fields of Oklahoma which had gained him his fortune would have meant a life of leisured ease. But it had not been merely good fortune for Gunlock. To win that fortune he had studied men, and played with them, and schemed with them, and used them, and trodden upon them; and the rich reward was merely a step on the bottom rung, for Gunlock. From the oil fields to the strategic center was the next step, and thus he had come to the Street—to New York, where he was to cope with the best of them, and gain ascendency.

Give him the power and there would be no stopping him. He could sway governments and rulers. He could govern men. And that was the goal he strove for. For that he had studied his men and, as they had built their fortunes, so would he. Rich and powerful. Rich as Sanderson, the sly, spying little engine of the Four Seas Oil, was rich; powerful as Burrian, of six railroads, three banks and two copper combines, was powerful. Burrian got his start as tool for the dirty work of Stienberg, and came into his place through politics and blackmail. And Van Slade, who, through cattle wars, had risen upon a

tower of beef to a pedestal of omnipotence. And Mason who had ruined fifteen thousand people and nine traction companies to establish the most reliable banking house in America.

The trick was to find your hold; get your grip on it, be it money, influence or position; and wrest it from the grasp of the holder. It needed determination, strength, and firm relentlessness; tireless hunting and ruthless pursuit.

Well, he had tried, and failed. He had risen to the near heights of Wall Street, felt the rung of the ladder firm beneath his feet—and married the wrong woman. Dorothy's father, the great Melden, had failed, and taken Gunlock with him. A sour draught, that had been; a bitter spectacle indeed which showed the father-in-law, who was to bolster Gunlock's fortunes, leaning upon him so heavily that he brought him down. And Gunlock had failed.

A lesson, that had been, which he would not forget. He had been weak when he should have been strong, helpful when he should have been ruthless. A pitiable figure he had played who should have cast off his wife and her miserable, futile father rather than lose hold upon that precious rung. If he could have been ruthless then. . . . If he could have squared his jaw at that moment and tumbled the old man into limbo, Lord only knows where he might not be now. As it was he was back where he had started. No, not that; for he had learned. He knew. He must be ruthless now; firm; relentless. He would not make that mistake again. He must fight like the rest

of them if he was to profit as they did. And it was the relentless hand that won. He didn't read much, but he liked Nietzsche; there was sense in that philosopher. Which is another evidence that Nietzsche erred when he assumed the bombastic manner.

In dealing with the Ruggles affair, then, Gunlock had been ruthless. He had imported his gunmen with tremendous care, bringing them to the La Bret clearing with a team of the best horses in Canada, on a schedule which covered their coming with infinite nicety. With nice psychology he had decided upon three as a number which would rebuff curiosity; and he gave them their orders. They would slav this old man, Ruggles, and depart for the border in as nicely planned a manner as they had come. Gunlock would not be implicated; he would not be remotely associated with them . . . and they would depart. With Ruggles out of the way, he could deal with the heiress to those acres as any determined man, designed by circumstances to be her advisor, could properly deal with her. He would indeed be praised for his kindliness in taking the acres off her hands. A rosy picture that . . . and the power to follow.

Still, murder was not in Gunlock's heart; it was only in his greed for power. With that in mind, with the hunger and passion for it in his brain, then only was he capable of killing. And it is hard to keep even such a devouring greed in the mind always. So Gunlock, seeing the old man soften visibly toward him as the time came for Dan's arrival, felt vaguely that somehow, in however indirect a manner, his end might

be achieved by means short of killing; and, chiding himself for his weakness, he had held his assassins off. He had received his reward.

Striding up and down his mother's living room, he hugged the future to him. He was to marry Naomi. Ruggles had said it; Ruggles desired it. "You will be the proper manager of all this land," the old man had said. Gunlock could have laughed aloud. proper manager. . . . To be sure there was the slight matter of Dorothy, but it would be nothing to give freedom to that woman. All she desired of him was money, and, with Ruggles' acres, he could give her her belly full of that. A quiet separation before the marriage, and all would be well. His lawyers had written that the thing was under way. Then Naomi, the land—and the oil. No need of the three rascals now. No need for Dan and his miserable allies. could pay them off, and cheap at any price. It was the thing to be firm; relentless, if need be: but the wise man stopped short of murder, unless it was the only way. He had a better way now. The gods were good to him.

"You're not going to leave me alone for dinner again?" whined his smiling mother. And she resigned herself to a pleasurable martyrdom, as he pressed by her with an "I dunno," to make for the barns beyond.

She still suffered cheerfully as she saw him ride away toward the settlement. "That little Indian woman," she murmured, indulging a cheerful conceit, whereby she regarded Naomi as the illegitimate

GUNLOCK SEES HIS WAY

daughter of a squaw who had been no more than she ought to have been.

But, although Gunlock was bound through the settlement for the river trail beyond, he was bound also to stop short of the Ruggles place, for at the La Bret clearing he had three henchmen to discharge.

CHAPTER XX

GEOFFRIAN MEETS A LADY, AND A FATHER MEETS HIS SON

While Gunlock had thus approved himself in the confines of his mother's living room, Geoffrian achieved the acquaintance of Dorothy Melden. He had entered the lobby of the Maple Leaf Hotel from its stuffy dining room; and she stood at the desk assailing Roel La Prise, the immature clerk. The boy, Robert, stood beside her, frowning with embarrassment, and shuffling uncomfortably upon the planked floor. When Roel, harried and distraught, caught Robert's sapphire eyes, Robert brightened up a bit to wink at him. But, on the whole, Robert was disconcerted. He wished his mother was not so apt to make scenes.

"It is outrageous!" she was saying. "Outrageous that a lady should come to such a place as this and have the door shut in her face. For that is what you are doing." Her tone was modulated, but, like her hard blue eyes, it had a cutting, biting quality which repulsed and estranged whomsoever she addressed. "This is a wretched place. A wretched hotel; and I am sure I should not wish to stay in your rooms. But to tell me outright that I am not welcome! It is too much!"

In vain Roel appealed to his God and to the boy. She meestook, he declared. It was that they had no rooms for her; not one which had not its guest.

"I cannot understand what you are saying," she said. "You mumble so. Robert, what is the man saying? And please don't scuffle your feet. Mummy has sufficient troubles of her own without having to correct your ill manners, I am sure. No." She had, indeed, never turned her attack away from the unfortunate Roel. "It is no use your mumbling to me. I consider your manner insulting. Offensive in the extreme. However, if you have no rooms here, have you no place to which you can refer me?"

But Roel was dumb; aghast at her torrrent of words. This was an experience which would leave its mark on Roel and never let him forget it. He was dumb, considering these things.

Geoffrian, seeing the outraged lady and the afflicted clerk, advanced helpfully.

"This Indian," she explained with a glance which seared Roel like the breath of a furnace, "this Indian seems determined that I and my son shall not have rooms at this hotel. Is that the sort of hospitality you have at Marbrek?" and she smiled upon him, seriously, severely.

She was a rather tall woman, and a smart one; very smart. A short nose that jutted forth rather sharply, and her snapping, biting eyes gave character to a face which otherwise fell woefully away in a small, willful chin under a rodent mouth. She had dealt generously with the mouth in the matter of cosmetics, an artifice

from which no other part of her features were wholly free; and the unnatural pucker thus bestowed upon her thin lips allied with two little vertical lines between her brows to give her a somewhat harsh and obstinate aspect. All this was set off amazingly by the wealth of her straight yellow hair which she had gathered in profusion about her head.

He advised her to sit and wait a moment while he looked for lodgings for her; and then he pleased Mrs. Malcolm tremendously by visiting her with the suggestion that she play hostess to this visitor from out-Mrs. Malcolm had seen the arrival of the newcomer and the apparent smartness of costume and equipment had not been lost upon her; she was also sincerely fond of children. Bags, rugs, and valises were gathered up then, and the mother and boy were transferred to the home of the bank manager. During the time the fastidious mother took to occupy the rooms which Mrs. Malcolm offered (and it was an appreciable time, for Mrs. Malcolm was a garrulous soul), Geoffrian talked with the boy. Robert was tall for his age, which was twelve, and handsome, with his thatch of tawny hair and his merry sapphire eyes. Snub-nosed he was and rosy-cheeked, with full scarlet lips, fresh with the beauty of childhood.

"You must see my horses," Geoffrian answered him, when the boy spoke of all the riding he had done.

"Mother thinks a gentleman ought to be able to ride and fence," he said, with a contralto voice oddly modulated for a boy. "So I have ridden horses and fenced a lot. You think mother's a tarter, don't you? Well, she is."

When Dorothy returned, Geoffrian had broached the matter of horses. "I thought Rob would like to have a ride with me this afternoon."

She had assented, lighting a cigarette to Mrs. Malcolm's indescribable delight. "But be careful of the boy, Geoffrian, won't you?" she had said. There was a certain raciness about her; already she addressed Geoffrian by his surname.

"I wish she didn't paint so much," said Rob, as he hurried down the board footpath with his new friend. "It makes a fellow feel so conspicuous when he's with her."

Geoffrian talked of the horses he had bought.

"I think you'll like them," he said gravely, and the boy said that he felt sure he would.

Across the way, outside the match-box bank, Gunlock dismounted for some necessary businesss on his way to the river trail, stood isolated for a moment, and the boy perceived him. "Oh!" cried Robbie, with a flush of pleasure on his cheek; and Geoffrian stared at him.

"Do you know that man?" he asked.

"Know him?" chortled Rob. "Of course I know him. He's my father!" And he dashed forward to the unexpected meeting, leaving Geoffrian aghast behind him.

If the meeting was unexpected, the consummation of it was appalling. Gunlock met the boy halfway, striding across the street toward him like a charging

THE RIVER TRAIL

bull. His face was a deep and unpleasing red, his eyes had in them the blood which suffused his face. The boy, running forward, met this darkling countenance and drew back, standing sculpturally in the roadway.

"What are you doing here?" Gunlock's words seemed choked with blood as his veins were; he spoke thickly, gutterally. "Where is your mother?"

The boy gazed at him, petrified with astonishment. "There," he faltered, pointing out the Malcolm's house. "We are stopping there."

Gunlock, without a word, turned from the boy, as a wild animal might turn from a lesser quarry to the greater kill, and rushed, bull-like, at the house Robbie had indicated. Geoffrian, who had looked upon all this, came forward then and laid his hand on the youngster's arm. Robbie turned to him and tilted up his face, seeking the eyes of his friend.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"You surprised him," said Geoffrian, smiling reassurance. "Come, old man, let's get on to the horses.

But they had little to say as they walked to the Brundage Place, for both the boy and the man had an equilibrium to reëstablish.

CHAPTER XXI

SON AND MOTHER

As they rode the river trail together, Geoffrian astride his shining mare, Robert on the dun gelding, the man and the boy seemed fit companions. Geoffrian had a great deal of the boy about him; a man who had left the puerile thoughts of childhood more definitely behind him than most adults, but yet had never lost the touch of gold which belongs to boyhood. And Robert had never been a child. He had never experienced the mawkish sentiment which leaves an ineffaceable mark on most young souls, for he had never known home, or father or mother. He had grown up free from horrid sentimentality, and he missed it sorely; perversely he hungered for home and mother.

Geoffrian examined the youngster who rode beside him with great interest. Robert's long, well-knit little body was well adjusted to his mount. He rode with a good seat—the good seat that is not to be acquired—and his strong young hands were light upon the reins, yet firm. Geoffrian looked at his face and smiled. The rosy cheeks blended with the golden brown of sunburnt skin and, touched by the red lips and sapphire eyes, made a pretty picture. The red lips were a little apart so that the boy's teeth showed, glistening. A

certain heaviness about the lower jaw also suggested the father.

Gunlock's boy! So this good-looking young horseman is the cub of that ugly devil himself. I suppose Gunlock looked like that when he was a kid. Certainly he never had those eyes. Gad! they shine like gems; and the kid's enjoying the country, too. . . . Wonder if he'll be another Gunlock. . . . Wonder who his mother is. . . . Good God! and that swine plans to marry Naomi!

Robert, looking at his friend, caught the other's interested gaze, smiled brilliantly, blushed like a girl, and drew his horse to a gallop in his confusion.

Grinning, Geoffrian thundered after him, caught up with him; and the two rode on together silently, and yet in strange communion.

In Robert's mind the thoughts flashed like irridescent dreams; it was always that way with his mind when he was in the country. And the dreams played over his young face; now lighting it with a smile, or bringing a flash to the sapphire eyes; again shading it with a frown, or smoothing it into a silken mask of ineffable contentment and innocence.

Geoffrian, letting the boy ride a little before him, could catch glimpses of these dreams, obliquely, and they stirred up his thoughts within him.

Nasty frown that . . . wonder what he's thinking about now. . . . These young kids seem to carry their own sunshine about with them. It has nothing to do with their inner selves, it's a physical radiance. . . . Yes it has too . . . however

low a kid is, he's quite innocent, and that sort of thing shows . . . an outward radiation . . . sexlessness, that's the charm of boyhood. I wonder what's going on in the young mind now. . . . He's thoughtful enough, Lord knows. I suppose Gunlock's rotten greeting has hurt him. . . . Poor kid. I'm afraid he won't get much attention from his daddums, or his mummy either. Wonder if he can appreciate that. . . Wonder if he's feeling hurt.

Then aloud: "You're jolly thoughtful, young fellow, why the brown study?"

The boy's face turned full upon him.

"I was thinking that you ride like a mounted policeman," he said amazingly. "Were you ever in the Northwest Mounted Police?"

Geoffrian pulled himself together. A man mustn't ride about looking like a startled fawn before a boy of twelve. It wasn't sensible.

"Why no, what ever put that idea into your head?"

"Oh," and Robert spoke wisely, thoughtfully. "I've noticed that the police are the only ones who ride these cowboy saddles in the ordinary way. All the people 'round here just slump down into them and swing about with the horse. You ride up straight, though, like a Northwest Mounted Policeman, so I thought I'd take a crack at guessing it. You're not a policeman in disguise, are you?"

"No," said Geoffrian, avoiding the sapphire eyes. Thank heaven none of the La Bret gang are small boys, he thought. "I thought you might be. It doesn't matter, does it? Though I wish you were, really; because the Northwest Mounted Police are great heroes, aren't they?"

"Some of them," acknowledged Geoffrian; and they rode on together, talking.

Robert, it seems, besides being devoted to great heroes, liked dogs and horses, and could thrash another boy named Beckwith, whom, however, he had never actually fought. This boy was at a school Robert had attended in Massachusetts, and Robert didn't like him because he was a liar and colossally dirty.

"He's older than me, but I can lick him," said Robert. "He's a coward, too."

He had been going to various schools with every change of plans his mother made, and she was a changeable woman.

"She's wild because dad trotted off and left her," he explained brightly.

"All right, old man, let's not talk family matters," pleaded Geoffrian.

"But that's a part of the story. You musn't think I got expelled from all these schools. She dashed all over the place. Has been for the last five years, chasing dad, you know. She wants his money and I'm the bait. Anyway, I always have to go into a form of kids about half my age. I don't know a damn thing to speak of. I never get caught up. What sort of a bird is that?"

"Mustn't say damn," warned Geoffrian. "You

won't go to heaven when you die if you curse and swear."

"Oh, I know lots worse than that," said Robert.

It was not a long ride, and for the most part it had been a silent one. Geoffrian had really desired to get away and think, and the golden little animal had been a good companion; a refreshment for weary thinking, and a boy who knew how to keep quiet.

In a way, decided Geoffrian, it's a good thing they turned up. I can have a little game of show-down with Gunlock now. A little game of show-down; but first I must get my cards from the fair lady. This boy's mother should be able to deal me a winning hand.

He left Robert at the Brundage barn, eager to put away the horses by himself. The boy thanked him for the ride.

"We'll go out a lot together, I hope," smiled Geoffrian.

"I hope so, too," blushed Robert. "I like you a lot," which was a half truth, for Robert loved the young man, and had devoted his little heart entirely to this new and perfect hero.

Geoffrian entered the upstairs bedroom in Mrs. Malcolm's house with some embarrassment, but Dorothy Gunlock, seated on the bedside, was not embarrassed in the least. She had a frank and companionable way with men.

"All this mystery is very baffling," she said dispassionately. "I hope nothing happened to the boy, Geoffrian?"

Geoffrian reassured her, a very easy matter.

"I merely wanted to ask you a single question," he said, "and it occurred to me that you might not like to have Mrs. Malcolm overhear us. . . . Are you Mrs. Ralph Gunlock?"

She smiled with her eyes, her artificially puckered lips not moving; indeed they moved almost imperceptibly even when she spoke.

"I hope you're not going to be impudent," she said.

"No, although I must admit to seeming impertinent. As a matter of fact, this is a more important affair than I can tell you of. It is necessary for me to know whether you are really Gunlock's wife."

She gazed at him keenly with a hard self-seeking in her eyes. It was apparent that she was prodigiously selfish; that she held her own interests before every other element life offered.

"Is there another woman, Geoffrian?" she asked him feverishly. "Is that man pursuing some halfbreed girl in this country?" She seemed to hope that her suspicion might be true.

"It's not for myself!" she cried with sudden wariness. "It's for Robert. You can't know, Geoffrian, what that boy has been through because of his father's neglect. Would you like to read a real dime novel? I will let you see it some day. It is the brief of my case against him, Geoffrian. You can't know how horrible it all was; and the effect on that poor little boy. Horrible."

She almost whispered it. Yet her voice was cold

as the reverberation of a beating on a metal drum. It was plain that her meeting with Gunlock had left something which rankled in her, and Geoffrian was a winsome fellow. It was easy for an incensed woman to confide in him her contempt and vilification for the man who had hurt her.

"It's the boy I am thinking of," she persisted. "Do you know he has never been kept in the same school for more than a few months at a time. His schoolmates think him a dunce. That man has never provided . . . and he was cruel."

Geoffrian wondered how cruel a man would have to be to gain advantage over this woman.

"He said I spent too much. And yet, you know, I never had any money to spend. He refused to pay some small debts I had at cards, and his own gambling debts! Geoffrian, I can't tell you how much that man has played away . . . and on women . . . his whole life is a gamble. They called him a plunger on Wall Street."

Again Geoffrian heard an outline of Gunlock's life. There were touches that Scott had missed. Rare and racy touches which she retailed without delicacy, without embarrassment.

". . . She was a black woman," she explained with low-voiced indignation, "a black woman of the country. He spent thousands on her; and I was in New York holding an army of creditors off . . . and Robbie without proper schooling," she added hastily. He gathered that she liked the racy bits; her eyes gleamed when she spoke of them. And

she didn't give a rap about the boy, that was very apparent; or about Gunlock either—for himself. Not a rap about any one, he decided, only herself. A cold, mercenary woman.

"I wanted forty thousand a year!" she murmured. "That was little enough, Geoffrian, for he cleans up millions on these coups in oil and gold and copper. Now he is up here for oil."

"Oh, hardly that," said Geoffrian, surprised. "There's no oil up here."

She laughed with a hard emphasis.

"So that's it," she said, and blew a cloud of cigarette smoke into the stuffy atmosphere. "That's his way. The way he works. Always. No one knows what he wants till all the land is his. I tell you, Geoffrian, there are thousands of acres of oil land up here somewhere and he's after them. Cummings told me that. Cummings was a man I knew. His associate, Geoffrian."

She laughed a hard assurance of how completely she had possessed the confidence of Cummings.

"I think I've got him now though," she said. "I don't know what he is up to; but I do know he doesn't want me here. I believe there's a woman in it. Ruth or Rachel or something. Cummings told me about that. He doesn't want me here, Geoffrian, and that's why I shall stay. I'm a mother fighting for her boy, you know, and he won't get away for anything less than forty thousand. He's got a fortune in this oil. . . . I'm a mother, Geoffrian, and it won't do."

SON AND MOTHER

He left her finally, uncomfortable for the knowledge he had gained. So this woman was still Gunlock's wife, and Gunlock wanted Ruggles' land for oil. A queer world, thought Geoffrian, and what a pair!

It was getting along, he noticed. Past tea time. The sun was low, and that golden peace of spring evenings, tortured in the north by clouds of mosquitoes and flies, rested upon Marbrek with its benediction and its curse. But Geoffrian knew neither the gloaming nor the mosquitoes; they didn't exist for him. With a queer sense that the delicate ghost of a little boy hovered over the bulky figure, he saw only Gunlock in his mind, and hastened toward the man's dwelling to play his game with the cards the woman had dealt him.

CHAPTER XXII

GUNLOCK'S WARNING

Geoffrian was moved by a quite natural indignation. The first time he met Gunlock he had judged him intuitively to be a man without regard or feeling for his fellow creatures. He had resented the man's pursuit of Naomi for that reason alone. He perceived that Gunlock was not capable of a love that included self-abnegation or magnanimity. Later he had discerned the menace in the man's attitude toward himself, and had resented it. In his business with the La Bret crowd, he had overseen Gunlock's visit there, and the man's bearing had betrayed his undoubtable connection, however vague it might be, with the three gunmen. This man Naomi was to marry and now his wife had turned up. matters revolved in his mind as he approached Gunlock's neat cottage; they were all his mind contained. His thought went no further; it was fevered by the resentment which these facts engendered.

Only when the faint and delicate shadow of the little boy occurred to him was his resentment tempered with a certain, not reasonable, compassion. This kid, Geoffrian was thinking with the fair slim figure of young Robert in his mind, is the man's own child.

. . . He turned over the suggestion in his mind.

Gunlock and the boy; so alike, yet so unlike. And it was not the idea that the boy might some day be another Gunlock that disturbed him so much as the idea that Gunlock was so like the little boy. He wants things, and he's going to get them, he reflected . . . just like a spoiled kid. He doesn't give a hang for anything else in the world. . . . It's when a man is most like a kid, most boyish, that he is most malicious and selfish, and . . . and dangerous. So much for childhood's happy hour. It's the promise in the kids that makes us love 'em; the potentiality, not the horrible reality. Gunlock wants his toys the way he wants them. Naomi's one of 'em. . . But he's not going to break that toy. Not that particular one.

Gunlock, since the stormy meeting with his wife, had been pacing up and down his mother's carpet and trying desperately to realize a plan to clear the way of this new obstacle. Having thrown off the idea of Ruggles' removal, he was reluctant to take it on again. And Geoffrian came in, standing at the door, and gazing upon him with an authoritative stare. Simultaneously the two men braced themselves for a meeting which both of them had at one time or another suspected must come about.

"It's just a small matter of principle," said Geoffrian, with a little smile playing about his closed lips. "I met your wife this afternoon, and thought I'd drop in and speak with you about it."

The sun was very low, so that the shadows of the little room, which opened a single window to the east,

diffused the light about the two men, making them mere bulks in the eyes of one another; mere bulks above which the faces, alert and resolute, stood forth luminously. Gunlock fixed his visitor with defiant eyes. His jaw was set; he was ready for battle.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I don't believe you've come here to my house to talk about matters which are none of your business; and to my knowledge I haven't got a wife."

Geoffrian seated himself in an armchair; the only armchair. Gunlock, with his hands locked behind him, stood, his back to the window, having the advantage of the light.

"I refer to the lady who is stopping with your son over at Malcolm's place. She tells me she is your wife. The boy calls you father. A simple matter of deduction."

Gunlock spoke coldly, with weight and menace.

"Am I to understand that you've come to blackmail me?"

Geoffrian still played with his smile.

"Yes," he replied. "In a way I've come to black-mail you."

"Go on," growled Gunlock.

"I merely wanted to say that in the light of arbitrary conventions one wife is generally considered enough. It's not a good thing to have more than one, and, besides that, it is unfair to the other girl."

Gunlock obscured the dying light of day in silence. "Go on," he said at last.

"I think that's all," smiled Geoffrian. "I take it

that you are able to follow me. Of course I don't wish to appear prudish, or anything of that sort, but—"

Gunlock broke in, impatiently.

"Don't be a damn fool," he growled. "You come here with colossal impudence to intrude upon matters which are none of your business, and then play the fool into the bargain. Now I take it you are threatening me. You idiot! I believe you are deliberately threatening me because of your calf love for the Ruggles girl. Well, what are you going to do?"

Geoffrian still smiled, but he was angry that Naomi should have been dragged into it. He had sincerely wanted to see the thing through in a purely impersonal manner. But he shrewdly appreciated the importance of his smile. He clung to his smile and raged inwardly.

"Isn't that enough?" he said. "Surely you are not fool enough to go on with your plans in face of the fact that even one man knows the truth. If Mrs. Gunlock stays here, it won't be a week before all the settlement knows it. I merely wanted to have some assurance from you that Miss Ruggles will not be troubled any further by your attentions either secretly or in the open."

He felt, suddenly, that he was priggish, that he spoke like a fool, and dealt with this man in an unworthy manner. He should fight this out without pretense or posture. There was a woman whom he loved, and Gunlock wanted to use her for barter and exchange. . . . And here he was muling and ges-

ticulating like a Sunday School superintendent.
. . But it was getting on Gunlock's nerves; he felt that.

Gunlock, a blurred bulk against the dim window, was twisting the hands locked behind him as Sampson must have twisted at his chains.

"You—!" he burst forth in a great restrained cry of rage. This man was a pest. Teasing him, provoking him; interfering in his plans as a coyote intrudes on the kill of the wolf. With a great effort he restrained himself and after that cry was silent for a space. Then he spoke with governed fury, thickly.

"I want to tell you, Geoffrian, you are doing a dangerous thing, interfering in this way. You've got a fancy for this girl, and come here with a damnable show of high principles because you want what I've got. A fine man to talk about moral principles. . . . You spoke about my plans. I don't know how much you know of them, and I don't care; but they are big plans, and there is no room for you in them. Keep out, it's none of your business. Lies and gossip will not stop me. Blackmail and jealousy will not stop me. Nothing will stop me, and such whining curs as you are least of all. You're lovesick about this girl, Naomi, and the more fool you. Sometime you're going to get over that. All right. is no time like the present. Forget it. Forget the girl. And, above all things, forget everything which makes you want to get in my way, or I'll smash you. I will. I'll smash you like a fly!"

His words had the greater force in that his voice

was so restrained. Geoffrian knew the fury behind that thick, gutteral voice, but he derived no satisfaction from it, for anger was moving him to a fury as great; an anger that was not against Gunlock so much as it was against the thing within the man. He seemed an epitome of all the perversity which moves mankind. The perversity which makes devils of sane men; which, understood, is powerless, but which Gunlock could not understand.

"You fool!" cried Geoffrian, and his smile was now a forceful thing, a part of the fire in his eyes and the ringing command in his voice. "You are a pitiable man, Gunlock. Can't you know the devils which possess you? Can't you see the filth you wallow in? You speak of Naomi as though she were a useful domestic animal. You speak of your plans as though they were more important than a covote's plan for carrion. Naomi is a woman. She possesses the same chemical elements as you do, in addition to which she is a woman. Bear that in mind. She is a woman. and I love her; she loves me. We are going to marry one another in a little while; and in the face of that you make your plans. There is no plan like the plan of our marriage, because that was made by a force you can't control."

Gunlock winced at the touch of whimsey in Geoffrian's challenge. He despised romance or fantasy. "Shut up," he growled. It was as though he addressed the spirit rather than the person of the man who was speaking.

"That's why I said you are a fool. You couldn't

have that girl even if you came for her with clean hands, because I've decided to marry her myself. As it is you'll have to cut out the part of your plan that includes her, because you've been cheating and I can show you up."

He arose as he spoke, and surprisingly Gunlock came close to him, speaking directly and closely into his face.

"Now go!" said Gunlock in a tone which resembled the bark of a dog. "Now go!" He seized Geoffrian's forearm with a convulsive grip. He veritably ground his teeth with fury. Geoffrian's calm and his unconscious manner of studying the man rather than considering his words angered him almost beyond restraint.

"Get out of here and get out quick. Your principles and your mush and your mouthing can all be damned, and you be damned, and the girl as well. I have a purpose to see through and the marriage is necessary to it. I'll send that woman down at the village back to the States with a flea in her ear. I'll get a separation and then marry the Ruggles girl. You can't stop it, you can't stand in my way. You'd better get out and save your neck. Now go!"

But Geoffrian stood firmly before him, with an unconscious austerity.

"You can't stop me now." Gunlock barked the words as though he would make them true by the very power of their repetition. "The marriage is certain now!" He clutched at Geoffrian's sleeve, trying to turn him toward the door. But Geoffrian stood with

his feet apart, his head obscured in the dark shadow Gunlock cast across the room. He could feel the man's breath on his cheek and hear the panting which marked his effort at restraint. Still he studied his man, so sure of his position that he hardly heard what Gunlock had to say. And Gunlock felt that sureness in the other. He was sensitive to the strength which gave Geoffrian his austerity, and he wanted desperately to slay his enemy where he stood. Words could not avail against the strength that Geoffrian had.

"It will not take place," declared Geoffrian. "You must give up all hope of that." The warmth of anger was gone from his voice because of the strength it held.

"It will, damn you! It will!" Gunlock was hiding his head in the sand.

"It won't," said Geoffrian. "And I will tell you why it won't. I have only to say a word to Ruggles... and it won't take place."

Gunlock turned from him suddenly and strode back to the dark window. There, with lowered head, he stood for a short moment; then he turned upon Geoffrian.

"All right!" he said, and Geoffrian was startled as he had been startled that morning in Ruggles' armchair by the same note in Gunlock's voice. It was a note of menace, and it carried a conscious power to perform an evil thing. "I have told you to keep out of this matter, but you won't. All right. Now listen to me, Geoffrian." As he spoke his voice proclaimed a face darkened by inexpressible malice; a

face which Geoffrian could not see. It was like hearing a death sentence from the dark. "If you go blabbing of what you know about me or my plans, it may bring death to you. I'm not going to fail this time. This time I can be as hard as need be. As relentless . . . ruthless!" His voice was rising with a strange effect of passionate desperation. "I shall kill you, Geoffrian, if you interfere. I shall kill Ruggles! I will! And I have the men who will do it!"

He ended upon a singular, upward note, as though he were about to shriek a culminating malediction. But he did not. There was a heavy silence, and a clock ticked with a great noise.

"Remember that," Gunlock said with a sudden quiet dignity. "Think it over, Geoffrian, because you're playing with death."

"I will," murmured Geoffrian. "But I must get along now. I must see Ruggles to-morrow about a matter of importance."

Again there was a heavy, ponderable silence in the room. In measured, noisy beats the incorrigible clock ticked on. And Gunlock spoke at last with a little weary note in his deep voice.

"Very well," he said. "You know my position. I have told you all I can. There are times in a man's life when he can't play with the possibility of failure. He cannot be sentimental in matters such as this. You say that you are going to see Ruggles. Very well . . . only I say that you are going to your death. It cannot be helped. It cannot be avoided. I can kill you, Geoffrian, and I will. I must. Be-

GUNLOCK'S WARNING

cause this time I will not fail. This plan must carry through. . . . I tell you that if you were my brother . . . If I thought more of you than all the world . . . I would still kill you . . . because this plan must carry through. . . ."

The clock ticked, the darkness gave no answer, and Gunlock sighed. It seemed as though he did not know that the man he was ostensibly addressing had long since gone; had gone, indeed, with the last word he had spoken. Gunlock spoke on, in the darkened room.

"A man must be relentless . . . firm. No other man can achieve more than I can achieve. . . Only I mustn't fool about with sentiment. . . You are going to tell Ruggles, you say. I think that you will be too late. You will be too late, Geoffrian. . . ."

CHAPTER XXIII

REVELATION

"Think it over," Gunlock had said. Geoffrian thought it over. He left the road to the settlement and wandered along the river bank, thinking it over. He sat in the dim evening, watching the water play about the overhanging willows . . . and the birds darting to and fro about their business of living . . . thinking it over. In truth the matter took a lot of thinking.

What was this plan of Gunlock's in which he was so deeply involved? He wanted the land of Ruggles for its hidden rivers of oil . . . and Naomi was the key to it. . . . But what of the three fine gentlemen at the La Bret place? What had Gunlock to do with them? Lord! the man was wrapped up in his plans. There was murder in his voice when he made those threats. . . . "And I've got the men who will do it!"

Geoffrian sprang erect and alert. Of course! The three at the La Bret place! The men who would do it!

They're his men. . . . Lord! what a fool I am. . . . That's what Alderson did in the shooting case down at Swift Current. Imported the gunmen and killed off his man. What a fool! Why in

the Lord's name did I ever join the police? What a fool! . . . Bet Gunlock would have had old Ruggles out of the way a month ago if it hadn't been for the marriage idea.

Now what'll I do? . . . Arrest Gunlock! . . . No evidence; besides I couldn't get a warrant for him. . . . We ought to have him, though. . . . Mustn't bring Naomi into it. . . . Rot! This is the law. . . . Naomi and I don't amount to anything under the law. . . . I'm a giddy old minion of the law just now.

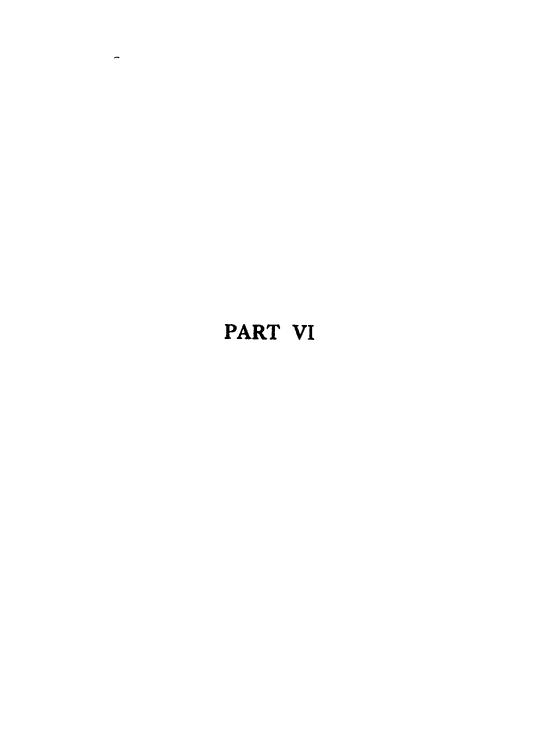
Arrest the three! . . . That's better. Vagabonds without visible means of support. . . . That's the thing to do . . . And, Good God! Quickly, quickly. . . . Scott can give me a warrant, and I'll need him along with me . . . doesn't do to be rash, y'know.

He was striding swiftly toward the town. Swifter than he knew, for his thoughts raced on, and his feet stumbled in the vagaries of the darkened trail without him knowing it; without him knowing that he possessed feet and arms and things.

At precisely the same time as he hurried toward the settlement, Gunlock, having passed him as he lingered by the river, was riding a thunderous sable mare along the river trail. "Too late! Geoffrian, too late!" sang the voice of an overwhelming obsession in his brain.

The killing must be done. With the old man dead, the lands would soon be in the market for the man who could arrange matters.





CHAPTER XXIV

ROBERT RIDES INTO DANGER

Now, when Geoffrian left Robert at the barn, characteristically trusting the boy to put the horses away, Robert, characteristically, had not done it. He had unsaddled the mare and led her to a vacant stall, not her own, and then, enamored by the wilderness, he had ridden away to the woods again astride the dun The clearing which occupied the settlement gelding. opened upon the river, so Robbie, not wishing to challenge Geoffrian's attention, turned his back to the stream and followed a trail that plunged into the forest behind the bald spaces of the village. Following this trail and that, investigating this verdant glade and pressing his mount through seas of green to that bosky hilltop, his alert young mind felt suddenly the fear of becoming lost. Bethinking himself then of Geoffrian's advice—"when lost seek water"—he pressed always thereafter to his left, in which direction he remembered the river to be. Thus he came crashing from a narrow forest runway to the river trail; and he caught his breath, chortling with flushed, merry face upon the cool and irresistible flowing of the water.

The same quality of boyhood which Geoffrian so shrewdly had seen to be pernicious in the man makes a vigorous, healthy boy a superb and beautiful figure in the primitive forest. His animalism; his unrestrained delight in freedom from the self-imposed control of manhood; his passionate enjoyment of those moments in which he can have his own way, without restriction and without the possibility of wrong-doing; these make the forest a natural place for the little primitive men which are our boys.

So Robert, his fair face flushed with delight and unsubdued enthusiasm, lived for his little, ungoverned moment as he had never lived before. He stripped off his clothes, flashed like a golden godlet in the water, and danced over the slippery rocks of the little water fall, which entered the river here, like an immature Apollo come to life. He ran in that state of nature among the trees, and romped along the brush-clad banks, reveling in the warm breeze which played upon his body. Muddy, the dun gelding laughed at him with a touch of envy, and Robert, shining in the sun, removed the saddle and rode the horse into the water. He slid off the shiny, slippery back and gurgled with his merry, golden head above the surface. He endeavored to remount and slid. laughing and shouting from one side of the horse to the other. And then, the horse returned to its haltered isolation, he sat, a pensive bit of sculpture, on a silver rock, and surveyed the world about him.

He started to dress, and stopped midway to observe a bright bird which, emboldened by the sudden stillness, came pertly forth to see what could have brought Bedlam and strange monsters into its sylvan world. What a beauty! thought the boy, and radiantly he regarded the tiny, brilliant songster. The bird was yellow and olive green; more beautiful in its vivacious reality than any picture of it could have been. Bet it's a finch, guessed Robbie, eyeing it intently. A golden finch or something. Bet it's got a nest around here somewhere. An idea! Bird's nests! Wish I had a rifle, reflected he. Just a little twenty-two; but anyway I'll bet it's got a nest. And he found the nest, taking it and its burden away from the outraged, tragic little mother. It was to add to his collection, he would have argued. But he had no collection, and anyway, he lost the nest, later, without particular regret.

He discovered his loss at the same time he discovered where minks live. It was far up the river trail from the waterfall, at a place where the trail skirted the river so closely that the water almost impinged upon it, making the earth spongy beneath the horse's hoofs. Down it dropped to the water's edge and then arose at an oblique angle to mount the bank again. And there, on a dead, half-sunken log, beyond the thick brush of the water line, stood the mink. A slim, brown fellow erect on his hind legs, holding to his breast with his tiny front paws, a shining fish. He looked at Robert; Robert, stopping his horse dead, looked at the mink.

"Golly!" murmured Robert, ecstatic.

But the mink said nothing; with three pert glances from three different tilts of his ferocious little head, he was gone under the bank. A flash of brown. "Golly!" and Robert was off, and after him. He found the tiny den under the bank and thrust a futile stick into it. Then he remembered the bird nest.

"Golly!"

He thought it over as the dun gelding trotted onward, away from Marbrek.

"I must have left it at the waterfall," he pondered. Yes, he had left it at the waterfall. "I'll get it on the way back."

He entered a grove of spruce and felt the austerity and solemnity of its somber shadows.

"Must be getting late," he thought. "Golly! . . . just a little further," he decided. He rode through bands of sunlight and shadowed glades. Always with the river near his view, shining, moving irresistibly. And the beauties of the farther bank.

Radiantly he responded to every sound and sight. Happily his heart sang in the sunlight. And radiantly he came upon another clearing. A clearing neglected and bramble-clad. A clearing with a dilapidated, sickly shack in its middle. A clearing with a brush-covered hillock barring it from the sunlit, shining river. The La Bret clearing.

Three men were out in front of the dismal shack, and that was all. The clearing, the shack, the men; yet Robert felt that it was not all. In every lonely habitation a presence dwells which is derived from the human souls who inhabit it, and the presence which hovered about the La Bret shack was eloquent of the three men who sat in front; with the blind eyes of the dirty, patched windowpanes, it

looked out upon the world and warned it of an undesirable thing. Robert felt the warning, but he felt the need of information even more. Radiantly he rode into the clearing.

"Can you fellows tell me how far I am from Marbrek?" he asked, for he had become suddenly conscious of the lowering sun, and hunger, and the possibility of being farther from home than he thought.

The three of them were lounging on the steps, and they took their visitor in with insolent, lazy eyes. Something to play with.

"Shore," volunteered Dakota. "Bout five miles." Which was a lie.

"Gosh," said Robert, "I'm hungry. Got anything to eat 'round here?"

"Wouldn't be surprised," opined the westerner. "You all bin out fer long, Bud?"

"All afternoon," said Robert, and he dismounted, prepared for hospitality.

"Wot's yer nyme?" Buck drawled nasally; mannish enough he was as to appearance but he had all the animalism and self-centered ruthlessness of the boy, less the moderating sentimentalism of boyhood. The boy detected the bully in the tone and resented it.

"That's a fine knife you got," he said to Dakota, with an ineffable assumption of the nonchalance becoming to a man among men.

"What is yer name, Kid?" The friendly Jimmy bespoke friendliness.

"Gunlock," said Robert. "Rob Gunlock. Could I see your knife?"

"Hell," responded Dakota. "That there Gunlock down to the settlement ain't your pop?"

"Uh-huh. Say, if you'll let me, I'll buy that knife. How much do you want for it?"

"Ain't for sale. I got that orf the quiverin' corpse of an Indian I killed in a hand-to-hand knife fight down in Utah," lied Dakota. He had won it from an Indian in a poker game which involved an indefinite number of cards and great dexterity.

"I'll give you twenty dollars for it." Dakota's lie made the knife tremendously worth having, as the bird nest had been. Robert drew money from his pocket; forty-three dollars and twenty-one cents. "I've got lots of money," he mentioned with superb nonchalance.

Dakota grinned.

"Smoke?" he asked.

"Don't mind if I do." Robbie lit the cigarette and puffed grandly.

"I ain't sellin' it," said Dakota; and he caught the covetous eye of Buck following the boy's money into the boy's pocket. "You Buck, you git in thar and git the kid a hunk o' bread or something," he ordered silkily, and Buck grudgingly got in.

Robert smoked his cigarette and dickered with Dakota to no purpose. He snickered uneasily at Jimmy's Fescennine pleasantries, received Dakota's profane embellishments to stories of incredible bloodshed with an assumed nonchalance, and all in all fell far below the exaltation which had so become him at the river side. But he was a little boy, and

he walked daintily in this mire with the clean feet of a little boy.

"Come along in 'ere, if yer want anything, then!" wailed Buck nasally from within, and Robert entered the shack with distaste for its fetid, untidy aspect, but with a certain relief at leaving the unclean soul of Jimmy outside. Jimmy and Dan left the steps as he entered and lounged away to discover that the dun gelding, neglected in the tangled brush of the clearing, had gone home. They tracked it down the river trail for a little way in vain.

"Nah then," said Buck, having assured himself that the boy was alone with him, "I want that money!"

And the bread in Robert's mouth became suddenly dry, choking him; for he found the strapping half-wit standing between himself and the door.

"Huh?" he faltered, feeling very small.

"Come ahn, give it over!" Buck threatened him with a frown, a peculiar, puzzled frown.

"No!" said Robert, "It's mine."

If the man had taken up some primitive weapon and made his demand again, doubtless Robert would have given up the money, whimpering. As it was the idiot impatiently rushed the boy, clapped one hand over his mouth and crushed the slim body to his chest with a giant arm.

"Come ahn!" he repeated. He was in the mood for murder now.

Robert tried to bite the hand, and Buck removed it, cursing. Robert tried to shriek for help, remem-

bering what names the other two had called one another, but he choked hideously. "Ah-h-h," he gasped.

"G-o-o-o!" swore Jimmy. The sound was a peculiar and awful oath of his own. "Cawl them an' they'll cut yer liver aht. Y' saw 'is knife!"

Robert now perceived with despair that he should have obeyed the warning presence about this place. The vague atmosphere which had said the shack was evil, the three men hideous and deadly things. With blind fear and hatred, he struck his captor in the face, and Buck returned his hand to the boy's mouth. But he returned it with the full force of a half swing of his giant arm, smashing it against Robert's face so that blood gushed from the boy's nose and trickled from the corners of red lips lacerated against his teeth.

"Ah-h-h," moaned the boy, and for a moment he collapsed. Then hatred and fear awoke once more, while Buck twisted him as though he had no bones, seeking for his pockets. Robert broke away.

"Oh, daddy!" he sobbed, although he knew no father in the familiar sense with which he cried. It was instinct.

"Oh, daddy!" and he rushed for the door. With a rending tear his shirt was ripped from a shoulder, and Buck retrieved him, whipping him off the floor like a sack and throwing him upon the table. "Don't! Oh, please!" he moaned. Buck struck him again across his blood-stained face. Then, man-handling him like the carcass of a small animal, he swung him between his knees. There Buck held him, torn and

ROBERT RIDES INTO DANGER

bleeding, raging and sobbing, while he searched obscure, crowded pockets.

Thus Dakota and Jimmy found them when they, came running in, and Dakota cursed fluently.

"Gunlock's coming up the trail!" he enunciated ominously; he was appalled at the spectacle of Gunlock's flesh and blood thus mistreated.

"He'll thrash the living tar out of you!" shrieked Robert.

What could they do with this beaten cub of the wolf?

"Put him in there," murmured Dan; and started dragging the boy toward the inner room. "Keep quiet," he threatened with death in his pale eyes. His face was close to Robert's face, and Robert, seeing death, which to childhood is worse than death, struggled desperately.

"No!" he gasped. "No!" he sobbed. "No! No!" There was a dull crack.

"That'll do it," said Jimmy. He had struck with a little leathern bag of buckshot upon the silken down at the base of Robert's round head, and Robert became a fallen angel; a limp, pathetic little form.

They threw it on to the filthy bedding in the inner room as Gunlock's hoof beats padded into the clearing.

CHAPTER XXV

SON AND FATHER

Robert stared upon the blackness and saw only things that moved and menaced him. The blackness was a veil, not merely in the sense that it obscured every familiar, worldly thing, but also in that he could feel it pressing upon his face, his body; pressing upon his open eyes. A black substance—pitch black-a background for uncountable horrible figures, which danced upon his naked eyeballs, grew bigger; and smaller; changed with hideous untruthfulness from unbelievable things to things he did not dare believe. Now and then one of these things. which stood behind him, but which he could distinctly see in its changing monstrousness, struck him pitilessly on the back of the head, sending a piercing agony through his brain. Then he wanted to crv out, or moan; but he dared not. He dared not tempt these devils with a noise. If he lay still in that opaque blackness and let the monstrous curtain press upon him without a sound, they might think he was not there. They might leave him alone until Geoffrian came in a scarlet coat and with a great sabre at his side to save him from this evil darkness.

He heard, far away, the voices of men talking together. He knew that they were not in his dark world, for they sounded like human voices. He wondered if it might be Geoffrian come to save him, and stifled a groan as the green devil behind him smote his head again. One of the voices rose, crushing the others with its pent energy and dominance, and Robert sent a thought up out of his black pit. "That," thought Robert, "is my dad's voice," and the very thought seemed to strike the black, impenetrable curtain and be stifled by it.

"If you don't," said his father's voice, with driving emphasis, "You'll hang!" Then with confident supremacy: "Now just do as I tell you."

"Keep yer shirt on, buddy!" and a sharp pain dazzled the boy's eyes as he recognized an evil sound. He had heard that voice before, spilling filth into the sweet air of afternoon; filth which had made him sorry, and ashamed, and afraid. It was the voice of Jimmy Mendlesohn.

"Don't go near the Ruggles' place till you've made a fire that'll burn!" drove his father's voice, and Robert suddenly became conscious of a crack in the blackness. A crack of light that seemed a few inches from his nose. It was this crack through which the voices came, and Robert thought it was a peculiar thing that he should stand so close to his father, hidden in this cloak of blackness, while beyond the cloak the voices rose and fell. He wondered if he were dead.

"Down south of the settlement—about three miles down the river—there's a little clearing," droned his father's voice, coming through the crack like a hidden messenger. "It's got a shack on it where a homesteader lives. Six kids they've got. Now at the edge of that clearing is a pile of slashings big enough to set fire to all of Canada. You light those slashings and let Jimmy here light the woods over to the east, see? . . ."

Robert was coming to earth. The crack of light betrayed the wall which held the crack, and Robert remembered. Now what was his father doing with these men? Hope and courage fled from the boy's heart as he realized the truth; his father was the friend of these men. And with the departure of courage and hope, cunning came to possess him. Robert was an animal now, blindly contending with a force he could fear but could not understand. He lay motionless and cunningly breathed lightly, for he knew that to hold his breath would be to betray himself.

"Don't cross the Lost River trail, though," warned his father's voice. That's your get-away. The wind's southwest; that'll send the fire up the river toward the settlement, and every damned man in Marbrek will get out to fight it, with Scott in the lead. I'll go with 'em, see?"

"Uh, huh!" Wisdom from Dakota.

"And first thing in the morning is when you do it. Ruggles gets up about five o'clock and goes over to the store. You'll be there, one of you, waiting to get into the store. Tell him you want title to this property, and he'll come out and walk with you. That's how he talks business. Get him down the

river trail some way, and knock him off. If you all fire once that'll kill him without waking up anybody else in the Ruggles place. Fire once and then ride like hell for La Pas. You know where your fresh horses are, and I've got the trail covered for you. They won't even know about the killing for about twenty-four hours if you start that fire right."

Robbie couldn't understand. He was full of fear, his every nerve was occupied in self-protection. Fire and murder! He wished he could not hear.

"And one more thing, boys." They had talked of money due them and he could hear his father counting out coins for them while he spoke. "If any one sees you on the job, kill him off, too. It doesn't do to be finicky. You don't want to hang."

Robert felt cold, his flesh quivered uncontrollably, the fetid odor of the bedclothes filled his nostrils, and he felt deathly sick. But fear governed him and, the courage of manhood having fled, the cunning of the animal forbade him to betray himself. He overcame the revulsion of his body, which would have given voice to fear in a cry or a sob, and stared wild-eyed at the shining crack of light, which to him was an assurance that he was not mad—or dead.

Perhaps of all the cruelties that Gunlock committed out of his stupidity, this was the most cruel. That he, however unwittingly, revealed to his little son the reality of naked fear. Millions of men have had to go through the fires of war to learn that fear which strips a man of his soul and

makes a beast of him; and few recover after the experience. And Robert, the merry, golden creature of the river trail, was cringing beneath it now. Three stronger, more ruthless animals than he were planning death and destruction.

A door opened and closed.

"Get to it, quick!" he had heard the voice of his father say; and the door had opened and closed. Silence followed.

Then: "The kid!" cried Jimmy . . . "if he heard us."

Without thought, without reason, impelled by the cunning of the frightened animal, Robert, with a rending heart, collapsed. They came in with a lamp and looked at him closely; bent over to peer into his blood-stained dirty face. They did not see its likeness to a petal trodden under foot; they did not know how close to death the little figure felt; they only peered, and Jimmy, with a vicious shrewdness, pinched the ear of the apparently unconscious lad. A vicious, twisting pinch, but fright, more powerful than will, kept Robert motionless.

"Hoped we haven't knocked him orf," reflected Jimmy.

"Don't figure none," drawled Dakota. "We'll be way orf from here befo' any buddy visits this yere shack, an' he ain't dead yet."

Buck Tanner begged to be stricken blind and profanely referred to tubs of offal. "E didn't 'ear nothink," he pointed out.

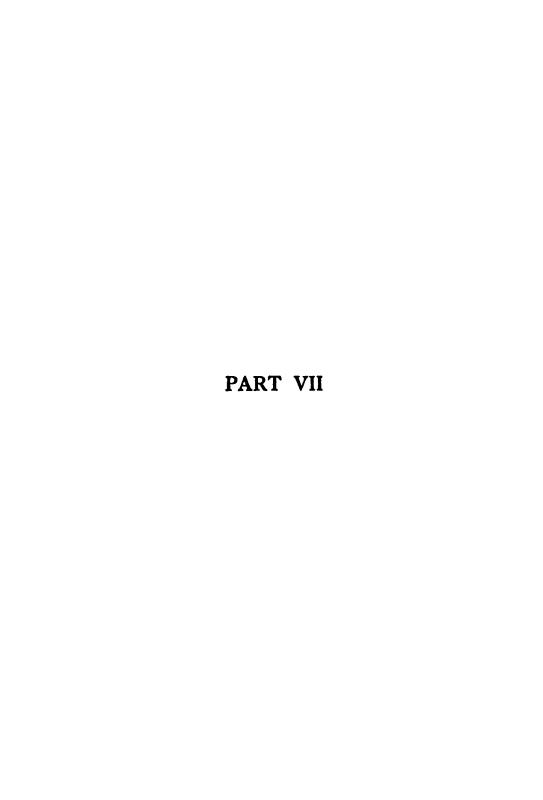
"No, an' he won't know nothin' w'en he comes

round," added Dakota. "We'll be right far from these parts then. Come on!"

The three of them set out like unclean animals emerging from their fetid den. Out; and the crack of light disappeared. Out; and a door closed. Out, out; and Robert, staring with wide eyes upon the impenetrable blackness, heard hoof beats receding down the river trail. And loneliness. Robert rolled over on to his face and wept stormily. Cried and moaned and sobbed, and sobbed; slower, more slowly, more quietly.

If he had known a mother he would have cried for her in that hour. If he had known a father he would have called upon him. He knew of only one place where love was; and sympathy and understanding. Only one man who could take the horror from his breast and give him back his boyhood once again. Geoffrian had manhood and love to offer. A shelter from this terror and desolation.

He arose and blundered out into the fresh night air. Cold, it was, and no moon or stars. Thick clouds scurried over him, and a moaning wind. Through brambles that tore at him and beat his face and chest he sought his horse, but couldn't find it. One way was left him, and he took it, running and stumbling; lying to weep upon the mossy, scented earth; rising to stumble on among the trees. Down the river trail to his haven, to his friend. Robert fought the darkness.



CHAPTER XXVI

AN UNHEEDED WARNING

Looking back upon the situation, Geoffrian himself would no doubt have admitted that it was inevitable that his mind should have turned to Naomi. He felt vastly elated as he strode back to the village intent upon his business. It was eminently satisfactory that the case should have been revealed to him in this manner. That Gunlock should have played into his hands, so to speak, and that the unraveling of that unfortunate man's cherished plans should have given him the stuff with which to weave his evidence. He had been sent to plumb the mystery of those three at the La Bret place and, thanks to Naomi, he had them in his hands. And there she was. . . . Thanks to Naomi!

It somewhat tempered his elation that she should enter into the matter. The scheme was a sordid, hideous thing, bespeaking a type of mind which Geoffrian was at a loss to understand. He could appreciate the mind that made a gunman. That was predicated for the most part upon a weakness which permitted of no compunction. An atavism, reflected he. But the Gunlock type; that's another matter. The gunman is lacking. He is the retarded boy who has gained in his years only the lusts of manhood; vanity,

conceit, and no feeling. But this type of human being which possesses unusual intelligence, foresight, imagination; and yet can kill. . . . I can't understand. . . . Anyway it's not right that she should be in it. . . . Swine fighting for a lace handkerchief. Nasty thing that.

Yet it was all a part of the web. She and Gunlock; and himself in the police. If he had taken that newspaper job in Revelstoke, he would never have come here. And Gunlock. It was only that this had occurred to Gunlock's mind. A thought; a scheme; a tenacious clinging to the only way . . . and he had drawn her into it. . . . Poor devil, like the villain in a play . . . and yet—a poor devil. . . . But he had pulled her into it, bringing her in touch with those filthy scoundrels . . . and her father. I believe it's true. I do. I believe he intends to murder that old man . . . and marry Naomi, Ugh . . . no decency about the man. He had spoken about Naomi as if she were a bundle of old clothes.

Geoffrian colored, thinking of it. The manner in which Gunlock had spoken of the girl epitomized for him the entire ugly situation. It was as though the hem of her garment touched pitch, and to him she was more than all the beauty and highness of womanhood. He knew and loved the clean lissome figure of the flesh; but better still he knew and cherished the bright spirit which obtained to her and bathed her with a light that cleansed his soul.

He had been lonely, that was true enough; and

not for want of companionship or understanding, or of love; for the world had given him plenteously of these. Only for her he had been lonely. Her out of all the world. And Gunlock had thumbed her garment hem; had led her near the mire . . . that bright spirit. . . .

He had reached Scott's cabin now and found it dark. A setback, this. He could not move without Scott's warrant and the three men must be arrested before morning. With Gunlock desperate, it was probable the three would act before another day was over. How act? It was a poser. After all, his case was all a guesswork; but Gunlock wanted the land. Old Ruggles was in the way, and at least he knew that Gunlock had some association with the three gunmen, and they were gunmen. He remembered the fair face of Tanner; the recollection was a spur.

Perhaps Scott was in the settlement. If not he must leave a message for him and ride out to the La Bret clearing alone. There would be no advantage in secrecy now. He would try to find Scott at the settlement, then into uniform and clear up the matter in jig time. He expanded his chest as he strode along, lifting his shoulders, and feeling very certain of himself. I could make an arrest or two to-night, he thought, with pleasure. Arrests were likable things in a way. They gave a man a certain self-confidence; knowledge of power, you know. The power of all society to crush one man. Nothing to gloat over . . . he reflected.

And he almost swung into Naomi, who was walking toward the settlement in the darkness.

"Lord! you gave me a fright!" he laughed. "Thought you were the bogy man."

"No," she said, "I'm not."

It seemed that she had left her pony in Father Chapotin's barn.

"I've come in for Mass to-morrow morning," she informed him. "I'm to stop at Mrs. Malcolm's for the night. Why don't you come in and call this evening?"

"Oh, no!" he exclaimed. It was not answering her invitation, it was rather an uncontrollable word of protest. He had suddenly thought of the guests Mrs. Malcolm entertained.

"But I don't understand," she said, hurt at his response.

"Of course you don't. But you think you do. You think you understand that I don't want to come and visit you. But you're wrong. My exclamation merely meant that you mustn't stop at Mrs. Malcolm's house to-night. Can't tell you why; not yet. But really. . . ."

"Now you are mysterious!" she cried; and he took himself inwardly to task.

Fool! Why did I say that? Now she'll stop there if she gets word her father's place is on fire and him locked in the jam closet. . . . But I couldn't let her. . . . Not without a protest, I couldn't.

He felt that she was to be shielded from contact with any part of the sordid affair. He invested her with quite unreasonable delicacy and fragility of body and soul. That she should meet the sportsmanlike Mrs. Gunlock without warning struck him as out of the question. He presumed that she felt there was something desirable in Gunlock; had some confidence in him. It was intolerable that she should thus be brutally disillusioned.

"Now you are mysterious!" she had said.

"It's merely—what is to be gained by avoiding these things?" he said, and his voice was deeply earnest, fraught with sympathy. "I think that you might find something ugly in the settlement to-night," he said. "I wish I had known sooner, but it's too late now for you to return home. I cannot take you now. All I shall say is this."

He stopped her, holding her two hands, and seeking for her eyes, hidden by the clouded night.

"Remember what I said upon the hilltop, Naomi. If you are ever stricken by the sense that the world is not as sweet as you had thought, nor mankind half as good, recall what I said to you that day when we rode together. That whatever in the world may happen to you or me . . . I love you. . . ."

His lips touched her forehead very lightly. She didn't draw away, but she drew her breath with a little click.

"Oh, it isn't fair!" she said. "It isn't fair to him!"
She would have broken away and made for the Malcolm's cheerful window light, but gently he held her.

"I try to help you, and I make romantics of it; but

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it's true, and you must learn it. You may see something of the world's ugliness to-night, Naomi, and I want to be with you then. . . ." Suddenly he felt the futility of his protest. He felt ridiculous, suddenly, as men in love are wont to do. He abruptly dropped her hands. "Good night," he said. "You know I am over at Brundage's place if you need me. . . ." And the darkness took him away like a stage effect.

She looked after him, at the black spaces into which he had gone. He had been there, before her, where she could touch him and feel his beloved hands upon her hands; his straight, firm lips upon her brow; then he was gone, and there was only blackness.

"Remember?" she said to herself in a sad, humorous way, which was all her own. "Remember! God forgive me if I ever forget . . . and God help me if I remember always, not having him!"

She turned to the hospitable windows.

CHAPTER XXVII

NAOMI IS DISILLUSIONED

Mrs. Malcolm was in a flutter of pleasurable excitement. It was not often that a woman, removed as she was from the congenial world where social usages are merely such gestures as emphasize the possession of ample leisure, had the opportunity of displaying her graces before a companion who would appreciate them. It is true that the fair visitor rather overdid herself in the matter of cosmetics, and Mrs. Malcolm inclined to a single standard on the question of cigarettes; but these things were quite permissible in the outside world among women of fashion, and since Mrs. Melden had young Robert with her she could hardly be as bad as she was perceptibly painted. As a matter of fact, if Gunlock's wife had come to Marbrek without her little son, Mrs. Malcolm would have made a bad guess, put her down as obviously a woman of no repute, and refused her the house. Thus Robert, whose mother thought him a great nuisance but a useful bait, was really quite as valuable to her reputation in Marbrek as a limousine would have been in the City of New York.

"My dear girl! I'm so glad you came in to-night," greeted Mrs. Malcolm as Naomi entered the little hallway. "I have a guest—from the outside you

know—New York, my dear. You must meet her," and she hustled the visitor into the drawing-room. If Mrs. Malcolm had lived in a tent there would have been a drawing-room in the tent.

"Miss Ruggles . . . " explained the fluttering hostess. "We call her Naomi. . . . Mrs. Melden comes all the way from New York City, Naomi, dear."

"Oh, I hope you won't be disappointed in Marbrek, then," said Naomi, and she crossed the room to take a place in the window seat. She had moved with the unconscious self-possession of a boy among boys, and, having known no reason for affectation in her life, she spoke with sure directness, making no bones about accepting this newcomer as a human being. This was disturbing to Dorothy. She had recognized Naomi's name immediately she heard it as the name of the girl Cummings had spoken of, and she identified her, too, as the girl Cummings had described. So this was the Naomi from the back blocks whom Ralph was playing with . . . and she wasn't even polite. By this Dorothy meant that Naomi had used none of the formulas she herself was acquainted with for the proper thing to say on being introduced. Herself. she always used the unconventional formula, but this girl wasn't even properly unconventional. Just a barbarian, decided Dorothy.

Naomi sat in the window seat and gazed at her, precisely as one man gazes at another. "You came up from Prince Albert, I suppose?" she asked.

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"Yes, and drove forty miles in a buckboard in three days' time. Think of it, my dear!" gushed Mrs. Malcolm. She herself would never have taken more than forty-eight hours for the journey, and Naomi, knowing it, smiled.

"It must have been very hard," she said.

"Awful," pronounced Dorothy. "It wouldn't have been so bad, but I had a child along, and he's such a nuisance, you know. And they were so rude. All along the way. And the inns at Lost River and at the crossing are unspeakable."

Mrs. Malcolm nodded sympathetically. She had endeavored unsuccessfully since her guest first crossed the threshold to discover why Mrs. Melden had come to Marbrek. Most tactfully and most persuasively she had tried to draw the lady forth and, although Dorothy still eluded her, she maintained her woman's belief in the inability of women to keep a secret, and hoped for the best.

"You must tell Naomi all about your journey," she said.

"But you wouldn't be interested," protested Dorothy.

"No," said Naomi honestly, "I've made it so often myself. But I can't understand about the people being rude. They are generally very helpful."

"Oh, but I assure you they were." Dorothy was up in arms, offended by the girl's blunt candor; incensed at the rebuke. "Most rude!" she said. She tried to convey that Naomi, too, was most rude, but Naomi was impervious to that sort of thing.

"Do you think you will stay here long?" asked Mrs. Malcolm.

"Of course one can't be quite sure," responded Dorothy deftly. "There was a great hairy creature at Lost River Landing who almost insisted that we come up to the settlement by boat, and you know the boat was quite unseaworthy. I could see that. But he was so insistent. A lumbering hairy fellow who said he was the factor. A sort of janitor, you know. He hardly allowed me to speak, he shouted so. He was positively insulting, my dear Mrs. Malcolm." She almost murmured in her carefully modulated voice. "Have one? Do. I always find they clear the head so," and she aimed a crushing effect at Naomi with the aid of her cigarette and her absurd red lips.

"That was Mr. McCree," explained Naomi. "He's in charge of the Hudson's Bay Post at the Landing. Perhaps he wanted to help you. The river trip is much easier. It is a good thing to listen to the advice of the old men."

"A shopkeeper! My dear girl!" A veritable offensive warfare was developing from Dorothy's camp, and it became more marked as Naomi proved more and more oblivious to it. A thick-skinned savage, pronounced Dorothy to herself, and proceeded to make scathing remarks about the creatures who grubbed in the clearings. But the girl deflected her naïvely.

"Of course your viewpoint would naturally be a good deal different from ours," assented Naomi.

Dorothy persisted. Gunlock had not spared her feelings in that stormy scene so recently passed, and

she still smarted from it. This girl was the chief reason for his anger and his brutal, vindictive raging. This girl without breeding, this hobbledehoy of the forest, was, after all, her rival; no doubt playing with Gunlock for the same stakes as she desired. She could not answer Gunlock when he had burst in upon her that afternoon, because he knew her too well; too much of what he had said had been true. But this girl she felt she could deal with; she would hurt this girl.

"But surely one is a civilized human being, or one isn't," she remarked. "I should think they'd rather dig ditches."

With the futility of a neutral on the field of battle, Mrs. Malcolm indefatigably fished and snared for information with which to feed her curiosity. Dorothy Gunlock ignored her.

"They work like clods, and their cabins, my dear Mrs. Malcolm, are intolerable. How you can live among such dull and stupid people, I can hardly understand. Of course, I suppose it is circumstances. We can't control them, can we?"

It was remarkable that Dorothy, intent upon injuring the girl, thrashed the empty air in vain, while Naomi, undesignedly, rankled the woman extraordinarily. Thus, in heaping contempt upon the people of the clearings, Dorothy merely aroused in Naomi's mind an impression to which the girl might have given voice with: "What a ridiculous woman!" But her face, reflecting this impression, stirred a sleeping desire in Dorothy to rend the girl in twain.

"Up in this country we often have to control them," said Naomi.

"I think Mrs. Melden means that even up here there are class distinctions." Mrs. Malcolm, feeling better than Naomi the thinly veiled hostility of the onslaught, and not a little puzzled by it, put forward tactful mediation, but Dorothy ignored her remarks and they were so tactful that Naomi didn't understand them. The girl herself disdained to defend the clearings before this pitiful lady of the cosmetics, and merely humored her.

"They are little more than animals," exclaimed Dorothy; and her "they" was so apparently meant to convey a "you" that Naomi became aware of the attack from that moment. Her first thought was: "What a trivial matter to pick a quarrel over." But that was because she knew nothing of the women from the world of Mrs. Gunlock.

"And how much more than animals are the people who live in New York?" she asked. An invisible but electric shock ran with visible effect about the room. Mrs. Malcolm looked up with open mouth, Naomi blushed, and Dorothy almost swore. Naomi's counterattack was a complete surprise to all three of them, and like most surprises it accomplished a repulse.

"New York is becoming quite civilized, really," Dorothy assured her. "But it has its disadvantages. The trees for instance. My dear Mrs. Malcolm, where in the world do you get your beautiful trees? You know we have nothing like them in the east."

So the siege was raised for a moment, and conver-

sation fell into stagnant channels, unrelieved by the obvious humor in Dorothy's comments upon things arboreal, because only Naomi knew it was there, and Naomi was deeply engaged with plans for a counterattack.

She opened this attack immediately after Mrs. Malcolm's departure for the mission, which she must visit every Saturday evening to bedeck it for Sabbath services. Malcolm was to call for her there on his way from the club, she explained, and thus revealed to her visitor the triple information that she was a good church woman, that her husband still paid some attention to her, and that Marbrek boasted a club. going was a relief to Naomi, for she knew herself lacking in the finesse of the professional duelist, and in that lack of experience felt a desire to have the thing out in the open. This strange, painted woman from the outside wanted to pick a quarrel with her, she gathered; she must find out why and, if it was important enough, pursue the matter to a conclusion. That was a man's way, and a man's way was the only way Naomi knew.

With the departure of Mrs. Malcolm, Dorothy, turned to the yellow stairs. She murmured her decision to retire.

"Not yet," said Naomi. "Let us talk a little while."
The woman flashed her a hard, shrewd glance, and smiled. "If you like," she murmured. They reëntered the sitting room.

"I'm so sorry you don't like the clearings," said Naomi. "We don't think it demeans people to work with their hands up here; and I think your objection to us is chiefly because of that."

"My dear girl, surely you didn't take what I said to heart? I hadn't the slightest intention of hurting you." Dorothy cleverly conveyed the contrary.

"I'm sorry for that," said Naomi dryly, "because as a matter of fact you did hurt me. I thought you wanted to hurt me. The men and women who work on the clearings about here are just the same as me. I am one of them. So of course you hurt me. But I don't work as hard as most of the women do; and, since the value of the dress you are wearing would represent to them enough clothing to last five years or more, I thought I'd tell you about it so that you won't make that mistake again."

"My dear girl," deprecated Dorothy. "What mistake do you mean?"

Naomi remembered the spiteful manner with which the woman had vilified her clearings. "What a trivial thing to quarrel about," she thought again. Now the silly woman was challenging her, confidently demanding a withdrawal. It was exceedingly, childish and absurd.

"The mistake," she said, "of thinking a dressmaker can make you the equal of the women on the clearings."

A quiet soul, Naomi, but the daughter of Benjamin Ruggles; and she had a mind of her own. So she said it, and there was an end of the ridiculous argument. This woman from the outside could take it as she liked. With a poisonous glance, Dorothy

turned without a word and walked to the door. So that is how she is going to take it, thought Naomi, and she watched the actions of the other with great interest. But she could not suspect what Dorothy had in her mind.

Dorothy knew that Naomi had something of character and spirit which she could not equal nor subdue; and she had to own herself bettered in the skirmish. But after all, her attack upon the girl was not an idle quarrel; it was rather an attempt to recover lost ground in the greater struggle for a renewed hold upon Gunlock's fortunes. It occurred to her now that, in the very cause of this encounter, she possessed a last shot which could wound this girl with perhaps a mortal wound, and strike Gunlock into the bargain. A blow in return for his assault of the early afternoon. "Whatever is between the two of them, this girl believes he's a free man, I'll be bound," she considered shrewdly. So she turned in the doorway and let the unsuspecting girl have her last shot.

"I think I'll retire, if you don't mind," she said icily. With a new interest in the woman's change of tactics. Naomi smiled assent.

"They tell me, by the way," pursued Dorothy, "that you are acquainted with Mr. Gunlock."

"A little," said the girl.

"I'm so glad," answered Dorothy. "I always like to meet Ralph's friends."

"You knew him in New York?" She felt a sudden

"Yes. He's my husband, you know. We must

talk some more in the morning. Good night." She departed through the yellow door and creaked loudly up the yellow stairway.

"Good night," cried Naomi with astonishing briskness, and she stood confounded in the center of the room, resisting an impulse to drag the woman back violently.

Thoughts, quick, keen, flashed into her mind like so many fires, blinding her. Gunlock whom she had trusted; whom she had accepted; for whom, in her good faith, she had rejected the youth and love and desirable understanding of young Geoffrian. . . . And Geoffrian had warned her. . . . There is something ugly in the settlement, he had said. Ah, how well he knew; how well he understood! And she had uncovered that ugliness.

She stood in the middle of the room, a statue of disillusionment, while the thoughts flashed through her brain. Then suddenly they left her. They left her with a shock as though from a perceptible impact. She stood motionless, and an indescribable transformation worked its way within her. A certain yellow light entered her hazel eyes, and her small strong fists clenched tight and tighter; for the impact had been the impact of dark hatred upon a virgin mind.

It was a certain madness which possessed her. Anger and hatred for Gunlock; humiliation for herself. These elements surging at once into the hitherto untrammeled pathways of her soul, took from her self-possession and control.

She hated Gunlock with a burning hatred. He

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must be punished, beaten, thrashed. She blindly demanded it. She madly desired it.

In an agony she left the house, remembering the gloating of the painted woman who had brought this madness upon her.

CHAPTER XXVIII

GEOFFRIAN REVEALED

Hardly knowing which way she went, traveling indeed with an instinct rather than a will to guide her, she found the brown-painted log home where Brundage housed his brood. The door opened into a large room, which was living room and hallway in one. This room was dark, and she stumbled over hidden furniture, making her way to the dim lamp that shone down the stairs from a narrow landing up above. She hardly felt the impact of her limbs against the objects in her way, but plunged forward with lithe, elastic stride, and with the yellow fire in her eyes. She slipped on a lower stair and staggered for the catch of a breath. In that brief moment her eyes left the light above her, and she looked down; then, turning to forge up the stairs again, she saw Geoffrian standing startled and alert above her. begun to descend and stood arrested with foot still upon the stair above, and she stared up at him as though he were a vision. He was clad in scarlet.

Geoffrian had donned his uniform and was, for the third time, setting out to seek Scott and his warrant. He was a handsome figure, with a touch of splendor in his manhood as he stood there gazing down upon her. The scarlet of his tunic accentuated the radiant touch of youth which he possessed; the trim cut of his uniform revealed the natural beauty of the young male figure well conditioned and symmetrically made; also Geoffrian had taken on with his uniform a certain authority and dignity inseparable from the Royal North West Mounted Police.

He came down to her, taking the stairs between them with an agility defying space and gravitation. In that alert moment at the head of the stairs, he had perceived that Naomi had learned all Dorothy had to tell her . . . and she had come to him.

"I'm sorry!" he cried, passing her in his rush and stopping a step below to seek her face; but she stared at him with intense amazement, and the yellow passion in her eyes.

"But you must take it off!" she whispered. "You must take that uniform off. I didn't know you were in the police! I never dreamed. . . ."

"But what's the matter?" He seized her hand, conscious of the necessity; the vital importance of placing himself between her and the hurt she had received. She was so young, he thought, just as once she had thought so of him.

She swept past him down the stairs, and turned before the black maw of the empty fireplace. The lamplight from above dimly invaded that part of the room immediately at the foot of the stairs and, baffled by the blackness of her skirt, it caught the white stuff of her bodice mistily and her head, rising above that mist. It caught, too, the yellow flame in her eyes, so that

Geoffrian, approaching her in the strange half blackness, was troubled.

"I am sorry that you found it out," he said, consoling her; but she desired no consolation, or rather she had already decided what he might do to heal her wound.

"You must take it off!" she repeated in a strained monotone. "Take off that uniform." She gazed at him a moment. "Oh, why are you so strange to me? I want you now. I want you thinking and feeling as I think and feel; and you are a policeman! You bewilder me!"

"Naomi!" He would have seized her shoulders, but: "No!" she cried, and drew away from him. So with hands beside him, he tried to command her attention. "Naomi! I know. Believe me, Naomi, I can understand, but there is nothing to be gained.
. . . Don't let it unnerve you." He was appalled to find himself so helpless in the face of a woman's overpowering emotion. He was appalled at the tide of passion which possessed her; the intensity of that passion. It had transformed her; and the yellow fire flashed in her hazel eyes. She spoke with a low but singularly vibrant voice.

"Ralph Gunlock came back here two years ago. Before that I had never known a man as young as he was, and I knew that he paying attention to me. . . ." She seemed disquieted by the scarlet of his uniform, and her voice neither rose nor fell from the intense monotone which had betrayed her deep anger from the first. "I wasn't experienced

in the world then. . . . I was eighteen years old . . . and he came out to see us often. Do you know why he came out? Do you know why he came to see me and to ride with me, and walk through the woods and sit at our table? He came because he wished to marry me."

Her voice now became a little higher; more strained; more rapid; rushing forward to a certain, unavoidable hysteria. "He wanted to marry me and I was eighteen. Men didn't come out to our clearing as young men come to the girls in the towns. I saw no one else. I knew no one else. . . . He wanted to marry me, he said, again and again. So I accepted him. Without even exchanging words about it, I accepted him . . . took him into my life. I let everybody in the world know that I was to marry him. That I had accepted him! . . . He wanted to marry me! He said that; but it was a lie. He only wanted me! Not for his wife. Just wanted me, like that Mendlesohn wanted Rosalie Sansebeare. He has treated me with as much respect as that! As much decency as that! He is already married! He is married!"

"Stop that!" commanded Geoffrian. "That's hysteria. Stop it."

"No," she said, with sudden firmness. "It is not hysteria. I am a little excited, but it is not hysteria."

He examined her shrewdly, and was puzzled. Certainly it was not hysteria. It was rather an elemental passion born of her very innocence and made pitiable

by her inability to cope with it. In that grotesque union of light and black darkness, her face was firm enough, and not wholly dispossessed of that peculiar serenity which seemed to rest upon her brow. A strange, yellow fire gleamed in her eyes like the glow that comes to the eyes of an angry cat; but there seemed to be a definite purpose behind the tumultuous surfaces of her emotion.

"He has insulted me!" she cried, her fists clenching convulsively. She meant that Gunlock had outraged her almost childlike trust in him. "He stood between me and everything in my life—like a wall, blotting out everything, and love and you! He took possession of me in a way you cannot understand; tricked me! Trapped me! And he was playing with me all the time, like that man with the half-breed girl. He was married! He had no right! He insulted me!

. . " She was panting with the violence of her agitation.

"So I have come to you!" she burst forth, with a passion uncontrollable and irresistible. "I have come to you! And you will make it right!"

"Of course!" he said, wondering what thoughts lurked behind those gleaming, impassioned eyes.

"I hate him," she cried. "I hate Ralph Gunlock! He took possession of me!"

Impetuously she plunged into the black interior of the room, where she threw herself on a rush-bottomed kitchen chair; and he could glimpse the white form of her face and shoulders swaying back and forth.

"You will punish him," she said with a voice that

trembled under terrible restraint. "You will hunt him down and beat him! Thrash him! Punish him! . . . That is why I have come to you!"

He made some sound; an ejaculation of protest and of love; and he moved toward her. But she sprang up in the darkness like a cat. She leaped forward, came close to him and tilted up her tense little face, intensely fixing him with her blazing eyes.

"Take off that uniform!" she cried. "You have no right to trick me like this! Take it off! You must hunt him out and beat him with your fists! With a horse whip! Anything! But punish him! Oh, make him suffer! Punish him!"

Now he seized her. Now he held her shoulders in his firm grip, and firmly spoke to her.

"I cannot, Naomi. Don't you understand? I am an officer of the Mounted Police, and on duty. There is danger of a murder in the morning, and I must attend to that. Murder! Do you understand? . . ."

"You mean you won't?" she cried.

"I mean that your anger; your amazement will depart as it cools off, and hysteria must not interfere with this job I have in hand. . . ."

"Ah, Naomi! I know that you have found out an ugly thing to-night; and I would have given my life to have saved you from the hurt. But let us forget the ugliness of that man's scheming for the happiness we can plan for ourselves." But she would not be appeased; would not even hear him.

"You mean you won't!" she cried again, "you

mean you will not help me? fight for me?" She tore herself from his grip. "You are afraid of him!"

"I have told you," he said simply, helpless in the pathway of her passion.

"I came to you because he had insulted me—and you are afraid of him. . . . He is too big a man!" She looked at him bewildered. "Are you going to do it?" she stormed. "You won't! You coward!"

He felt that, and winced, remembering his thought of how he might come out with Gunlock in a trial of strength.

"Naomi, your father's life is in danger. I'm on duty, can't you understand?" But she would not listen to him; much less understand him. She sprang past him to the doorway, moving with a lithe, nervous resilience that was catlike.

"All right! You won't! My father has a hundred men who will. Oh, I thought you would want to! I thought you would be glad to!"

"Don't you understand? Won't you try to be sane?" his voice rang deeply. "I am the law now. If you threaten him in my hearing, I must even protect him. I am a mounted policeman!"

Naomi turned upon him then in an intolerable frenzy.

"Protect him! . . ." 'A quivering, choking cry, and the door slammed. She was gone.

CHAPTER XXIX

A WAR CRY IN THE CLEARINGS

Geoffrian was bewildered. He had had so little experience with women that this scene bewildered If he pursued her, he could do nothing more than overtake her. If he overtook her, he could do nothing more than throw his feeble protest before the flood of her wrath and indignation. But he wanted to pursue her; he wanted to explain to her that circumstances alone prevented him from finding Gunlock out and punishing him. For the man deserved it, and Geoffrian, the reader, the thinker, the original man, strongly desired to be the instrument. Mad as Naomi's rage and hatred was, he had taken something of it, added it to his own indignation at Gunlock's treatment of the girl he loved, and achieved a great desire to have the man down; to beat him down, punishing him, thrashing him-for the woman's sake.

He left the house, and turned mechanically in the dark street toward Scott's cabin. If the corporal failed to be there now, he had decided, he must go out to the clearing alone. Gunlock might even at that moment (while Geoffrian had been donning his uniform) be at the La Bret place planning murder.

The street was black with the impenetrable dark-

ness of night under thick black clouds. A warm wind was blowing briskly up the river, and the trees moaned with it, grumbling and howling sinister predictions of storm.

Geoffrian stood undecided between the settlement and the destination of his duty; stood shrouded in impenetrable blackness, and struggled to subdue a primitive and essential impulse. As a matter of fact a desire for actual conflict with Gunlock was established in his heart upon a basis more profound than the actual injury inflicted upon Naomi. It was established on the fact that he was in love. Because he was in love, Geoffrian had known and suspected that Gunlock and he were made to clash when first he had met the man in the girl's presence; and there is no doubt he now felt some intimation that only by a conclusive, elemental combat could he effectually dispose of his bulky rival with any satisfaction to himself.

"If I see Scott first, the police will have intervened to my advantage. Oh, I should like to avoid that. I don't want the fates or circumstances or the mounted police to take the satisfaction from me. I want to win her myself. I respect that man as the strongest enemy I am ever likely to meet, and I want to thrash him into respectful surrender; into respectful renunciation of all his plans—and Naomi. I want to prove myself. Then Scott and the police can carry on."

Thus he would have spoken if he had given voice to his inmost thoughts, conscious of the absurd irony which embodied in himself the interfering force of the police. As it was he stood silent in that blackness, silently watching a few scattered lights of the settlement. When he did finally speak aloud, it was because his mind had leaped with a swift transition, far from everything to do with Naomi, Gunlock or the web of circumstances which had entangled him in Marbrek.

"Hello!" he cried, "what's that?"

Off to the south the heavy, racing clouds that enshrouded the night and gave it its inky blackness had appeared in a faint but ruddy vision, a voluminous and moving ceiling, which seethed and scurried over the gaunt tree tops, revealed in silhouette by the same red glow. As he watched, the glow became a more angry red, and, leaping upward to join and mingle with the sullen skies, appeared a sweeping column of black. Black smoke with red carbuncles of fire in its train.

"A brush fire! Damn dangerous with the wind in this direction; and the woods are as dry as tinder!"

He suddenly became the policeman. Coolly and resourcefully his mind surveyed the situation. To the settlement or to Scott? If Scott were at home, he must be awakened. If not he himself must take command. There was a battle to fight. For an instant he debated; then, his back to the village, he set out at a run for the Corporal's cabin.

He ran in blackness, so was blind, but he felt the vibration of a galloping horse behind him before he heard the sound of the beating hoofs. The horseman overtook him, riding hard and recklessly in the blackness, and passed on. He heard the thunder of the hoofs grow fainter before him, and saw as though in a vision the Corporal's cabin take shape out of the far darkness as a light within conjured the windows into being and a door was opened wide.

The rider was from the clearing. He was telling Scott of the fire. Obviously his own best place was back in the settlement to saddle Muddy for a hard night's work. He turned again to Marbrek, and saw that the woods were blazing fiercely in the south.

"God help 'em in the clearings!" he said grimly to the darkness, and hastened toward the settlement. Hoof beats behind him. Two mounts returning where only one had come.

"Oh, Scott!" he shouted, and the Corporal reined in sharply, peering into the blackness for the speaker. Nothing of deliberation about Corporal Anthony Scott now. Nothing of stupidity or leisure. He was galvanized into an alert and resourceful leader. Fire meant destruction, desolation and death to the clearings, and well did the Corporal know it. placed there as the embodiment of a power sworn to fight that devastation and that menace, and he was in his element. He could rise to occasions, could Anthony Scott; could command men with short, pithy sentences, lucid and incontestable; could lead men with superb and sacrificial courage into a hell of flaming forest; could fight whether winning or losing until no breath nor consciousness remained in his body or his brains. Given forms, Anthony Scott

was a pitiable object; given action, he was a splendid and indomitable man.

"It's I, Geoffrian!"

"In uniform!" exclaimed Scott.

"I've discovered that Gunlock's connected with the three gunmen. Hired them, I believe. He plans murder with them. I was coming for a warrant. Vagrancy, you know. It will let us hold them."

"Aye, but it'll have to wait."

"Yes, but bear it in mind, and we'll each come back to Brundage's place as soon as we can get away from the fire."

But Scott had been thinking swiftly, resourcefully, as becomes a man of action.

"I'll take the fire," he snapped. "You watch the clearing," and he was off, defying the darkness.

Before Geoffrian reached the settlement, every house, cabin, shack and tent was brilliantly alight. He came into the street at a run as Scott prepared to ride out with most of the men of Marbrek. Swinburne, on a lumbering wagon, strove with four great horses which were to rush a load of men to the fighting line. Another wagon was being prepared amid a red blaze of torches and primitive flares that threw a weird illumination over the increasing horde of people. Brundage, the physician now, directed a knot of women who were to aid the injured and relieve the smoke-oppressed. Mrs. Malcolm, all the outside world forgotten, commanded a contingent who would brew stimulating drinks and prepare healing unguents. Here was Parrot, with a wagonload of men

from the mill, thundering and rattling down the roadway with flaming torches and hoarse shouts. Malcolm and Father Chapotin, the one at the reins and the other at the bridle of Malcolm's team, inviting every man who could to share the buckboard with them. Brundage, marshaling his first-aid contingent, and Scott, watching them ride by, run by, sweep by, into the engulfing blackness, into the moaning, grumbling forest. And there was Gunlock.

The crowd had thinned when Geoffrian saw him; they had hurried on to the scene of action. Parrot and the mill men had followed Swinburne's lumbering equipage, and Scott had thundered past the laden buckboard of the bank manager to edge his way up to the van. As volunteers from the clearings came into the settlement, the women and children directed them, and the crowd had thinned; so few men remained outside the Maple Leaf when Gunlock, having prominently assisted in marshaling, harnessing, distributing, gave a last helping hand to the collection of bandages, oils and unguents from his store and galloped after the departing army.

Geoffrian saw him go, and stopped short in the doorway of Brundage's house. Going to the fire . . . going to the fire . . . thought Geoffrian—and he must ride the other way.

He had not seen Naomi among the crowd, and now he glanced at the Malcolm's house, alight and wide open across the way. He pictured her there, nursing her hurt and hatred; heartbroken because he had failed her . . . and Gunlock was on his way to the fire. A man could easily find a way to meet another man alone in such a scene as the frenzied struggle on a fire line, and there was little for him to do at the clearings. Gunlock could hardly get out to his ruffians until the morrow now. . . . Gunlock was the man to watch! . . . He must watch Gunlock!

And it occurred to him, perversely, that he must not follow Gunlock in unform. He must be in plain clothes. . . . A tiny but, in the light of circumstances, a significant voice, said within him: I cannot fight Gunlock in this uniform. And he turned to the house, eager to change his clothes; to follow Gunlock; but a voice spoke at his elbow. A voice with a sob in it.

"Don't! Please!" sobbed the voice. "Don't run away from me, please!"

The voice of a child. Of Robert.

CHAPTER XXX

ROBERT'S PART

There were four steps up to the doorway and the boy must have been close behind Geoffrian when the young man suddenly turned and leaped up those four steps. Then: "Don't run away from me, please!" Robert cried with the spent sob in his throat, and Geoffrian swung about to search the darkness for him. He made out the diminutive figure, swaying as though drunk or drugged, attempting, with an awful and grotesque limpness, to mount the lowest step. "The poor kid's ill," thought Geoffrian quickly.

He ran down the steps, whisked the boy up in his strong arms, and entered the house with him. The lamp still glimmered on the landing above, and threw its dim light upon the fireplace at the foot of the stairs; and there, where Naomi had stood and stormed against him, he placed the boy upon his feet. The little fellow swayed uncereainly, and quickly Geoffrain knelt upon one knee, throwing an arm about the boy so that Robert leaned against the other knee and against Geoffrian's broad right shoulder.

"Steady on, old lad. Steady on!" warned Geoffrian brightly; and the dim light shone down upon the boy's face. "Oh! My poor old kid! What have they done to you?"

The deep compassion, the sympathy and fine affection in the young man's voice was too much for Robert. He felt suddenly how really small and weak he was, and so he pressed his nose against Geoffrian's shoulder and wept.

"They beat me. They hit me on the head." he said. Geoffrian lifted the round silken head and looked at the boy's face. Quite inconceivably ugly Robert was now. His lips were cut and swollen, and dry blood encrusted them. His nose was a dark and bulbous libel. His eyes swollen and obscured by rings of dirt. Soil had conspired with blood and tears to begrime his face as a whole with a distorting mask of lines and furrows and blotches. Now he tried to control himself and resume his cast-off manhood, but when he looked into Geoffrian's eyes, all was up with him; for Geoffrian was gazing upon him with an unmistakable solicitude and affection. All his life Robert had failed to find that look in any of the eyes to which he had naturally turned for it. was, in short, only a little boy, who had never been permitted to admit it; and now that he found, in his great need, one who would give him solace and understanding and that look as well, he capitulated out of hand.

"Who? Who hit you, Robert, old man?"

"The little, dirty man. Jimmy! He hit me on the head with something."

"Jimmy! Not Jimmy . . ." he grasped the boy firmly and peered into his eyes.

"Robert," he commanded, "can you understand me?

Are you well enough to answer a question for me?"

"Yes." Robert accepted the challenge. Of course, he remembered, he was to get more than sympathy from Geoffrian; he was to get manhood. He pulled his little body together, stiffened and tried to play the man; but a weight of weariness was tugging at him.

"Were there three men? A tall man with pale eyes and a face like stone? And Jimmy and another one named Buck—Buck Tanner?" demanded Geoffrian.

Robert shuddered.

"That's him! That's him!" he cried, and leaped from Geoffrian's hold, dancing with excitement. "He tried to get my money, and hit me. . . ." He stumbled drunkenly against the lowest stair, and Geoffrian seized him.

"Damn shame!" he said. "Come on. You'd better come upstairs," and lifting the boy he carried him up to his room where he laid him upon the bed while he lit the lamp. When he turned back to Robbie the boy was asleep.

"Come!" cried Geoffrian, "not yet! I want to know some more." He shook the boy vigorously, but might have been shaking a corpse for all the response he obtained.

He examined the sleeping boy with careful, expert eyes. Saw the testimony of Robert's tremendous journey down the river trail, the evidence of the unequal struggle in the shack. He examined the boy's pitiful little pockets; rifled; and the scratched and bruised flesh of his throat and arms.

"Poor kid!" he reflected, and forgot Gunlock, forgot himself before the spectacle of what the child had endured. And then it occurred to him that he might arrest the three gunmen without a warrant for their mistreatment of the boy. He hesitated, undecided whether to play nurse and put the boy to bed before he went. "Won't do him any harm to sleep in his clothes," he decided callously, and opened the bedroom door. At that moment Robert, as though wishing to rebuke him, rolled over on the bed and fell to the floor with a great clatter of well-heeled boots.

"No, No! I won't! It's mine!" he shrieked, lustily.

Geoffrian yanked him to his feet.

"It's all right, old man!" he said.

"No, No! It isn't," said Robert, not knowing whether he was awake or dreaming. "I came to tell you, Geoffrian. I came all the way to tell you about the fire."

"The fire?" cried Geoffrian, amazed. He sat on the bed beside the boy and shook him very gently. "What are you talking about, old man?"

"Dad told them to set the woods on fire while they shot an old man out on the river. The fire would take the police away, he said."

"Told who, Robert?"

"The three men out there. They hit me on the head and then I heard them planning to kill this old man. My father told them to set the woods on fire so that they could get away. Early in the morning."

He jumped up, excited. "You're a policeman, aren't you?" he cried. "Stop them! Stop them!"

He stood erect before Geoffrian, quivering with excitement; stimulated and nervously alive. "You're a policeman!" he cried with shining eyes. "I knew it!"

Geoffrian turned a pitcher of cold water into the basin on his washstand.

"Swozzle your face about in that, old man," he ordered. "I can't stand that mug any longer, and don't look in the mirror."

Robert rinsed his face obediently, deriving further stimulation from the cold water.

"Now then," said Geoffrian, "tell me what you're talking about," and Robert told him, immensely important in the face of the scarlet uniform and his own usefulness. He would have made much of the struggle in the shack. "I punched his face. Hard," he said with intense seriousness. "I think it jolted him." But Geoffrian cut him short with a question: "And then?"

"The other two came in," continued Robert, and so on, his weariness forgotten, to a complete betrayal of his father.

Robert did not appreciate the fact that he betrayed his father. As he went on with his narrative, he vaguely remembered the horror and fear which he had felt. But his father appeared in the story only as the proverbial ogre; the chieftain of the pirate crew; the embodiment of evil. But Geoffrian understood, and it troubled him profoundly.

It came to him suddenly while he carefully absorbed the boy's evidence, and with quick interruptions made the matter brief. The boy was betraying his own father! And he perceived the shocking irony that had brought this diminutive man cub out of far civilization to confound Gunlock and be a witness against him.

"Are you very tired?" he asked Robert, when the boy's tale was finished. But Robert, all excitement, had forgotten weariness. "Then listen carefully. I must go out and arrest these men as quickly as my horse will travel. But your father is deeply concerned in this, old man, and I think it will be the best thing for you to go and find him. Make a clean breast of it to him. Robert. Tell him all that you have told me. Then whatever happens you will have played this game in the open. There must not be anything underhanded between a boy and his father's . . . well, men who are opposed to him, see?" The sapphire eyes gazed into his seriously, with a touch of fear.

"But he will be angry," said Robert.

"I don't think so. I hope not. But better make sure some other man is near. It is a thing you must do in spite of fear, old man, because this experience is going to be a part of your entire life. Years from now you must be able to know you did the right thing... and you have done the right thing so far, old man! You've done it bravely.

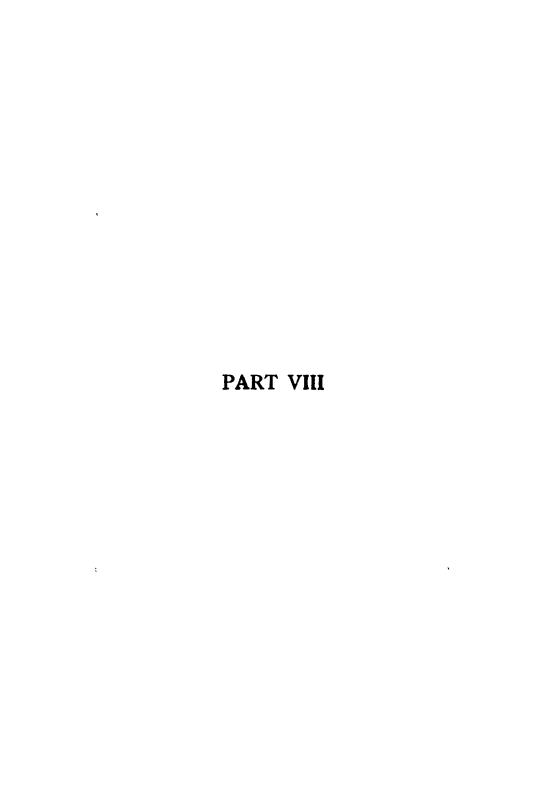
"Now I must hurry! Your father is on the fire line. Go out with some one of the crowd. They are

THE RIVER TRAIL

riding through continually now. And have some one tell Scott I've gone. I may need help. Corporal Scott! Remember the name." He placed his hand tenderly on the slim shoulder. "Go on, little man. It is necessary for the happiness of your whole life. Go on and tell your daddy what you've done. I must hurry away now."

"All right," said Robert briefly. "Good-by." And Geoffrian felt a pang of compassion keen as pain at the sight of the ragged, weary little figure, shuffling down the stairs on its strange mission.

"Poor kid!" blurted the compassionate fellow. Then, realizing the need for all haste, he took the stairs two at a time and was out through the back door, strapping his pistol as he went.



CHAPTER XXXI

AN ELFIN MESSENGER

Geoffrian had pictured her alone in Malcolm's house, nursing her outraged feelings while the fire threatened Marbrek. That had been a careless picture, thoughtlessly engendered in a troubled mind. Naomi was, in fact, with Mrs. Malcolm at the porch of the Maple Leaf, a veritable headquarters of relief and ready assistance to the volunteers who constantly passed through the settlement. If there were to be any injured, the women had beds and refreshments for them.

Now, standing outside the claptrap building, Naomi was watching the glow in the south. The rising smoke with embers in it, and the fleeting clouds. The air had a tang of the fire in it now, and a haze of smoke colored the settlement with the rosy tint of the flames. She stood there in the wind, her hair disturbed by it, her garments flapping about her; and the distant, flaming forest, the sullen wind-swept clouds, the bustle and the fighting were in tune with her mood.

In the menace of a great peril the danger is somewhat lost upon the people fighting it. Only the women and children left upon the clearings were able to hold in their minds the realization that, if this fire swept on, they must retreat before it with little hope

of ultimate escape. For only the forest offered them refuge—and the forest was so much fuel. They might cross the river, but in that wind the fire would also cross it at the sweeping angle above the settlement. Hope lay only in the sullen skies. If those clouds broke, the fruits of a lifetime of toil, houses and imperiled lives might all be saved. The lonely women prayed for rain, and prepared in the meantime for the retreat.

Naomi, however, was among the fighters. The danger was subdued in her mind by a passionate desire to take part in the fighting. She had taken her orders obediently from Mrs. Malcolm, her anger and hatred stifled in the face of a peril that threatened all the clearings; but she regretted that she had not gone with those other women who did a duty like hers on the very fire line. Mrs. Malcolm, feeling a responsibility for the girl's welfare, had kept her there, but at last Naomi's persistence had won her freedom. Now she waited for a conveyance; for some one from the clearings who would take her to the front; and Robert came to her with his mission.

"I want to go up and find Mr. Gunlock, please," he said. "Do you know some one who will take me there?"

She looked down upon him in amazement, trying ing to identify him among the boys of Marbrek.

"Who are you?" she asked, and: "But you are hurt. You've been fighting."

"That's nothing. I've got to go and take a message for Mr. Geoffrian. He's a Royal North West Mounted Policeman, you know. I've got to take a message to Mr. Gunlock. There's a murder." He felt inordinately proud of his position before this female, and was ignorant of the eager interest he aroused in her.

"But who are you? And what do you mean by murder?"

"It's out on a clearing," he said. "Geoffrian's going. I'm to take a message to Mr. Gunlock."

A rasp of wheels in the dusk, and a light wagon leaped out of the darkness upon them. A shriek of brakes on the iron, and two horses drawn to their haunches. A load of men for the fire line.

"Anybody going down?" they shouted with intense resolution upon their faces.

"I am!" cried Robbie. "I am!"

She seized the boy roughly around his middle as he sprang up to the hub of the wheel and held him back as the men in the wagon grasped his shoulders with strong hands.

"Speak! Tellme!" sheurged. "What is this murder?" His ugly, swollen face leaned close to hers and his sapphire eyes flashed with his anxiety.

"Leggo!" he cried. "It's three men out on the river! Leggo! They're going to kill an old fella named Ruggles. But Geoffrian won't let them. He's going out and arrest 'em. Leggo!" He kicked out at her, and she let go. A rasp of wheels in the dusk. The elfish child was whisked into the huddled cargo of the wagon, and the wagon was off to be swallowed in dusk and nighttime.

To the eye blinded by darkness, lightning reveals

the fact that the world exists with startling abruptness. Robert's impatient words revealed to Naomi swiftly and with cruel clarity that her world was threatened with annihilation. For she knew the three men at the La Bret place well enough to know that they would kill. Swiftly, remorselessly, without hesitation or compunction, they would shoot down whatever opponent might have to be removed. They were killers all—and Geoffrian was going to a certain death. That was the lightning flash; that was the blinding shock which showed her her world on the brink of sure destruction. For Geoffrian was her world.

Suddenly she saw it; vividly she pictured him falling before the bullets of those three. She perceived at once that all her perplexities and aberration were due to this fact that Geoffrian alone made life worth living for her. Gunlock's perfidious conduct had outraged her and possessed her soul with hatred only because of this. The danger of the fire had been subdued for her because of this; and now, with Geoffrian riding forth alone, she forgot her father's danger almost completely—because of this.

Geoffrian had come into her lonely, primitive world with love for her; and love had leaped up in her heart to respond to him. That was all she lived for now; all that the world and the breath of life could hold for her. But the lightning had flashed and she was filled with dread. Those three men were killers; they would shoot him down as coolly, as certainly as a hawk would fell a pigeon. It was madness for him to think of going alone.

CHAPTER XXXII

"IT IS CERTAIN DEATH!"

Geoffrian had taken the brown mare out of the barn with a restrained impatience for the lantern light that had delayed him by its dimness. Before mounting he stopped to adjust a girth which, by virtue of that same dim light, had been buckled with a twist. He pulled up the strap, took in the slack and snapped the buckle home. For a moment then he stood as though transfixed, considering his equipage. Slapped a pocket; manacles. Slapped his pistol butt; loaded. Touched the coiled rope at his saddle; all well. All ready. He turned to mount and found Naomi at his side. He stood and faced her, with one hand upon the mare's black mane.

"That boy told me you were going out to arrest the men at the La Bret place," she said. She spoke with an odd restraint, as though trying to gain his attention and his favor by the very sanity of her remarks. "I came over to see you first . . . before you go. I wanted to ask you not to go . . . not alone, I mean."

"There is nothing else to do," he said.

"No, no! You must not go." She strove to put reason in her voice; to speak rationally. That, she conceived, was her only chance. "It is useless for

you to go alone. Useless. They will kill you." There, she had said it, and she wished she had swallowed the words before she spoke them. Well she knew it was a woman's reason and would have no weight with him.

"That is as it may be," he said. "I don't think they will. But I must go, and go quickly, for the fire is a blind they have set for murder. Now control yourself Naomi. I must go and prevent the killing of your father." He placed a toe in the stirrup and a hand upon the pommel, but she laid her hand upon his arm, and was close to him, pleading.

"No, not alone. Ride down and get Scott first. Don't go alone; it is certain death. They will kill you like a snake. I know it. I am not asking you out of selfishness. It is for you. I love you. I cannot bear to see you die. I can't bear it!"

But she controlled herself admirably, divining that hysteria would surely lose him. "It would be foolish, futile! You would just throw yourself away and do no good! For they will kill you, surely!"

He brought his foot to the ground and spoke directly to her.

"Naomi, it has gone beyond you and me, this thing. Gunlock has planned your father's death for to-night, and I am appointed to prevent it. You cannot stop me. We cannot guess the power of those three men to defeat me, and I cannot choose for myself."

With a swift movement he was in the saddle and the mare would have leaped forward, but she had the bridle rein. With a vision of the scarlet tunic, which so neatly clothed his figure, stained a darker scarlet, and hideous black marks upon it where bullets had made their way, she seized the rein and seized as well his boot in the stirrup iron.

"No! I can't let you go!" she cried out now without restraint. "You are mine, and I cannot give you up! Oh, be kind to me, be merciful! I love you more than all the world! I can't lose you now, I can't!"

But he only knew that even now the gunmen might be at their work, or through with it, and he must hurry, hurry!

"Forgive me, Naomi!" he cried, and sent the mare plunging forward, while, desolate, she sank to the ground behind him.

He rode madly then for the river trail, under the scurrying, sullen skies, with the red glare of the fire behind him and the tang of the smoke making his brown mare fly as though from devils. To the east a tiny thread of silver lay upon a hidden horizon, where dawn fought the clouds for possession of the forest, and competed with the flames to make visible its sunshine.

Naomi heard him depart through the lonely street and, as though she had been hurled violently upon the dust, she clambered to her feet. She reached out and, feeling the lintel of the barn door, leaned against it. Then with dazed eyes she looked at the angry glow that now tinted all the settlement with its ruddy haze and speculated upon the menace of it.

The end of Marbrek this might be . . . the

end of all her world, of herself, her father, and every human being she had known. Stifled in the burning forest; suffocated under the parched, smoke-laden air. Oh God, the children! . . . That elfin, bruised boy whom she had seen . . . and Geoffrian was riding out to certain death. . . . They will kill him as if he were a mad dog. Shoot him down without mercy. . . . How coolly he had ridden out. He must have known his danger . . . he must have seen only death for his reward. And it was to save her father's life, perhaps. . . . His duty.

She smiled.

How like him . . . how sweet, and brave he was. Oh, I love him . . . I shall always love him . . . always, and she burst into a storm of unconquerable tears.

They passed as quickly as they came. She stopped weeping with strange abruptness and, breathing deeply, lifted up her head.

"Oh, I am proud of him!" she cried. "I am proud! And he loves me!"

Standing there against the lintel she was conscious of an inrush of new, clean life. He had loved her, and honored her with his love. She perceived that the hysteria, born of selfishness, had betrayed her. There were great encounters before her, as there was a bitter adventure facing him. But there was splendor to be won through sacrifice, and upon his brown mare he rode alone to the altar. He rode alone with the memory of her selfish, hysterical pleading for perhaps his final picture of her, to whom he had given his love.

She felt a deep and ineffaceable regret for that; but the spirit that had entered into her did not suffer her to dally in dejection. There were encounters to be met; she must act swiftly to assist him. She would go to him and let him see her as she was; as he would love to see her at his side.

With the serene assurance of womanhood in matters of the sort, it did not occur to her precisely how useful she might be. She hurried through the darkness to the mission where her pony was, and to the beginning of the river trail. And as she pressed forward a gentle hissing sound filled all the air and a pungent dampness rose in her nostrils. Pattering and rattling in the foliage, hissing in the dust, mercifully, compassionately fell the rein. With the rain sounding upon the roof, she saddled her pony in the mission barn, and in the teeming rain the wiry little animal darted forth with her, bearing her to destiny.

CHAPTER XXXIII

FATHER AND SON

The conveyances and horsemen, despite their flares and lanterns, and despite the dash with which they thundered out of the settlement, progressed slowly toward the fire. The darkness of the night, already accentuated by the heavy clouds, was made the more opaque by the veil of smoke which now crept spectrally through the forest. And the trail below Marbrek gave little room for more than a buckboard to pass. The wagon which carried Robert was obstructed by all of these obstacles. Heavily loaded with the men, it had picked up along the way, it did not move forward easily upon the rugged trail. It creaked and groaned in the ruts, shrieked as it grazed forth-jutting trees, and seemed in imminent danger of falling to pieces.

It is an oddity of human nature that we should always picture the fates as moving swiftly; the placid conceit of man is perhaps reluctant to admit that slow pursuit can overtake him. "The mills of the Gods grind slowly," we say; but in our hearts we don't believe it. We believe that they grind exceedingly fine only when we are slow enough to let them catch us napping. Gunlock, for instance, was not to be caught napping. He was master of his fate; and yet here

was a bruised and negligible atom of humanity, whom, if Gunlock thought of him at all, he thought of as safe in bed, moving slowly, precariously but inevitably toward him through the darkness with the dread sentence of Gunlock's fate in his fevered little mind.

Robert's body ached with weariness, and each bruise and scratch it bore hurt him with almost intolerable hurt. He was thrown about by the lurching of the wagon as though he were a sack of oats, and with every lurch the pain moved within him like a substance. The smoke became thicker as they approached the fire, and the parched heat increased. His eyes smarted in the smoke, and it caught in his throat, choking him. The glare of the fire colored it with a brazen glare, and when the wagon approached the fringe of the fire line, and he saw the black forms of men moving in the distorted shadows of the trees, it seemed as though he had come to the portals of Bedlam. These things kept him from sleep.

He had told the men in pathetic confidence that he had come to find his father, and they, with rough pity made indifferent by the job in hand, looked out for Gunlock.

At the fire line, however, they left the wagon with amazing swiftness, and, having securely tied the frightened horses, plunged into the smoky woods to become phantom shapes among the other phantoms. They left him alone as a thing of small importance. They had told him to wait there for his father, but he knew the menace of the fire occupied their minds entirely and that among these figures in the smoke

he was completely alone; forgotten; without existence. He felt it deeply, but it did not distract him.

He clambered from the wagon, moaning quietly to himself because of his aches and pains. Up on his feet in the forest, he found that his legs would not support him, and he collapsed, quietly moaning, to the ground. This unexpected calamity frightened and haffled him. He could not find his father! He could not walk! And he was tired. He sat on the ground in the smoky darkness and quietly, all to himself, he moaned, suppressing self-pity. It was very strange. The line chosen to repulse the fire was some rods beyond this place, and that fire line was at working distance from the fire itself, so that between Robert and the burning forest, there was a wide expanse of woods. In the daytime only the thick smoke, tinted with the copper glow each particle reflected, would have betrayed the oncoming flames at such a distance. But in the night the red anger of the scene was magnified a thousand times by the blackness in which it raged. And the wind carried sounds to Robert.

'A sustained roar was the voice of the fire, and it might have been also the moan of the forest in agony. 'A high pillar of flame, springing from a crowded copse of evergreen, showed the trees twisting as though in martyrdom, and, in the blazing depths from which that flame emerged, a storm of embers fell like raining lava, while others, fiery messengers, arose to travel windward, carrying the flames like pestilence. The fire devoured the forest in sheets, in

clambering laces and in lambent flames and the red glare of it blackened the darkness which accentuated it. To Robert all the world had vanished; only the appalling blackness of oblivion and the fire remained.

But between him and that fire a world indeed, existed; a tortured world peopled with striving forms, which, in the evil color of the fire, and obscured by the writhing smoke, seemed like a new Bedlam with so many demons struggling in it. Here, where the men of the clearings prepared their fire line, the black tree trunks stood gaunt in the glare and towered overhead. The men, visualizing frantic women, children whimpering and dying in the smoke, and the red fury devouring everything they lived for, were engaged in hacking a wide clearing, and plowing up the ground of it, preparatory to setting a back fire to repulse the blaze. They flung themselves into the work with few words but short oaths, knowing a terrible need for haste. Heavy horses, blindfolded and wild with fear, were harnessed to fallen trees and piles of debris, dragging it away. Axes rang on the wood and an incredible pathway, already torn out, grew wider as they worked. And as they worked the breath of the flames grew hotter; the dull roar louder.

This Stygian field had its casualties just like any other field of battle. Men overcome by the heat and smoke, exhausted by the strain of toil, fell back upon the cooler spaces in the rear. One sought the place beside the trail where Robert's wagon stood, and Rob-

ert first saw him when he loomed up out of the brazen smoke. A gigantic bulky man. He came out of the smoke and stood by the wagon, leaning his head upon his arm like a sick child. When he raised his head, Robert saw that his face was blackened and grotesquely streaked with tears. He was coatless and his white shirt clung to his bulky shoulders, soaking wet. Here and there it was torn. When he spoke his voice reverberated with an extremity of anger and despair.

"My God!" he muttered, "it won't stop. They'll never stop it!" And Robert thought he had never heard anything so tragic as that dull, stifled cry. A sudden gust of wind brought to them the dull roar and angry crackle of the fire; and a hot wave of smoke. Again the man spoke; this time with a quiet, natural voice as though hopeless of the powers of emotion. "The whole damned settlement. Everything!" he said, and Robert recognized the voice.

"Daddy!" cried Robert. Gunlock peered through the smoke at the limp figure on the ground.

"What are you doing here?" he said, without any emotion whatever in his voice.

"Mr. Geoffrian. . . ." cried Robert. He tried to rise, stumbling about on his hands and knees like a wounded animal, and Gunlock picked him up to place him on the end of the wagon, with his legs dangling.

"Are you crazy?" demanded the father. "Your mother must be mad to let you come out like this." He supposed, ridiculously, that Robert's blackened

face was due to the fire; that the child had been in the fire line.

"He's a Royal North West Mounted Policeman," cried the boy; and Gunlock winced as though his son had struck him.

"Who?" he roared. It was more an exclamation than a question.

"Mr. Geoffrian."

"He's trying to turn you against me? My own son. And did he do this?" The man's face was frozen in a mask of rage. In a frenzy of fleeting conjectures he saw the remittance man lying to his little son (whose existence he himself had hitherto ignored), then beating him; for he saw the marks on Robert's swollen face.

"He beat you?"

"No," protested Robert. "He is kind to me. He's fine. It was the three men out at the clearing beat me. Jimmy and those, and I was out there—they had me prisoner. Then I heard you with them talking about how you would make this fire, and then I came in without any horse and it was dark, and so I told Mr. Geoffrian!"

Gunlock stared at him, a man of stone; horrified; incredulous, and yet he knew these unbelievable things had happened.

"You told Geoffrian!" he said it coldly; stunned before the sentence of his fate.

"Yes. He's a North West Mounted Policeman."
"No."

"Yes. He was in uniform, and I told him." Rob-259 ert was amazed and frightened at the manner with which his father had received his tale. He had expected anger. This seemed worse than anger. He wondered if his father was about to kill him. It wouldn't hurt, he thought.

An icy voice came out of the frozen man. "The fire is going to kill us all," it said. "But first I am going to kill him. He used my own flesh and blood to spy on me."

The child leaned forward and laid the light hands of a child upon his arms.

"No," said Robert seriously, and with anguish, for he was sickeningly tired. "He didn't know about it, and he said: 'You and your daddy must be in the open,' and he made me come and tell you all about it."

Gunlock placed his hands beneath the boy's armpits; the little body seemed so limp.

"Tell me all about it," he faltered. "Oh God!" And Robert's bowed head was besprinkled with falling drops of water. It had begun to rain.

"Rain!" cried Gunlock in a tremendous shout. "It's going to rain!"

If he had turned a tap, his words could not have had a more immediate response. Following the scattered volley of its first large drops, the rain descended upon them in clean sheets of welcome water. It seethed through the thirsty foliage, hissed and rattled on the underbrush, and made a filmy, liquid carpet beneath the feet. Gunlock and his son were clothed with water, and the glare in the forest was subdued.

The deluge lasted only a moment and then subsided into a sustained and even downpour; but Gunlock asked no more.

"Thank God for that!" he had cried when the cloud-burst came; and he had meant it. He had no heart for the spectacle of what wild destruction the fire would have wrought if that downpour hadn't come. And on the fire line a little army of men who had despaired thanked God as well. They might work through the night now in mud and without relief; might work with little rest for the day beyond; or another day; or a week. But the rain had come to promise them at least a hope; and there were those who said the rain would last. Still they could take no chances. Such a fire would not die beneath a moment's downpour. So they worked on, thanking God.

The woods hissed and rattled under the rainfall. Gunlock shook the boy.

"Robert!" cried he. "Where is Geoffrian now?"
Robert gazed at him with dazed and sleepy eyes.
"He's gone to arrest the three men!" he cried. "He is a North West Mounted Policeman! He will save that old man!"

Gunlock gazed down upon the round, silk head. Then briskly: "Listen, Robert. You did right. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, daddy, I hear."

"Then remember what I say. You did right. Always remember I said that."

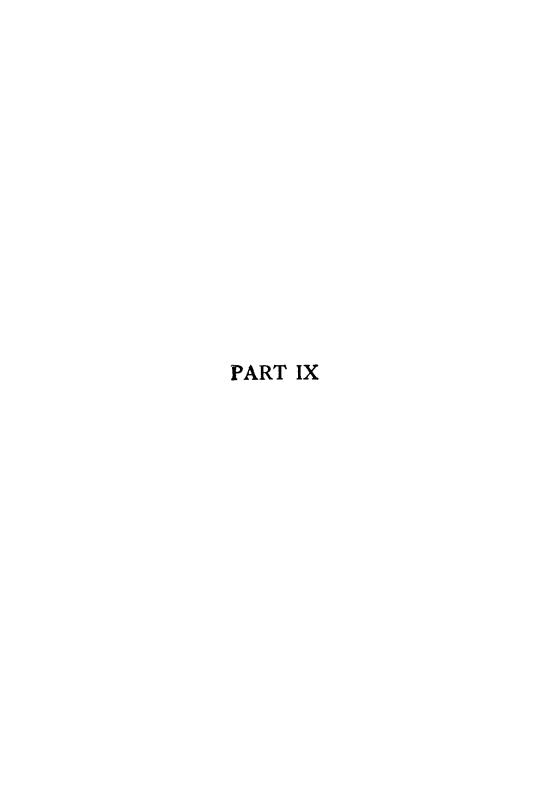
He took his hands from Robert's sides, and the 261

boy's hands slipped away from his arms. Clumsily Gunlock threw a horse blanket on the wagon floor, and said: "Lie on that." But Robert was asleep as if dead. Gunlock then moved the boy's body on to the blanket, where he would be sheltered from the rain, and strode away. A few yards from the wagon, however, he turned on his heel and retraced his steps to the wagon side. For a moment he gazed at Robert's body, which twitched nervously in the boy's troubled sleep.

"God! He's my son!" he exclaimed, as though in apology.

Turning, he dashed down the trail toward the fire line, and in a few moments his sable mare was carrying him madly through the smoke and rain in the direction of the settlement.

The thin strip of silver in the east had broadened by the time he reached Marbrek, and the glow had disappeared in the mist of rainfall; but he had no regard for that. Gunlock was tortured by an intolerable speculation. Supposing his gunmen had given him his money's worth? What if he were a murderer now in the eyes of the world; a hunted murderer? He prayed that he might arrive in time to prevent the murder. It was useless now. Besides, a strong man, a relentless man, must never be found out.



CHAPTER XXXIV

THE LURE

Darkness infested the Ruggles' domain like a gray sickness, and the rain, a moving curtain, rattled and hissed among the leaves. Apparently the light of day was indefinitely postponed that morning, and the woods were permeated by the baffled dawn. darkness was unhealthful, as though the day was born sickly and deformed. The clouds hung low, seeming to touch the tree tops with their sullen draperies. The woods were dank with wet and touched with the odor of the distant burning. It was not strange that Ruggles' people should for the most part be ignorant of the fire. A few perhaps, awake in those silent cabins embraced so closely by the forest, had seen the glow upon the sky; but before a general alarm had aroused the scattered demesne, the rain had come. For himself, Ruggles had slept through the night, as he always slept, like a tired, healthy child; and like a child he arose in the morning earlier than all his people, refreshed and ready for the resumption of his life.

It is interesting to consider that at about the moment when Ruggles arose to take up again the serene threads of his existence, Brade and his two companions trod the tortuous trail from the La Bret clear-

ing in the teeming rain, with the purpose of bringing that existence to an end. It was not in Ruggles to suspect the possibility of any power which could menace him. The simplicity that had guided his life, the serene destiny that had given him dominion, and the quietude of his power had invested him with an amount of complacency which was proof against premonition. Had he been a Canute, he would never have sought the salutary lesson of the uncontrollable seas; he would have accepted the incorrigibility of the "Behold the waters as an assurance of his power. insweeping tides," he would have said. "Even the boundless oceans lick my boots." But he would have said it to himself, complacently; he would rather have accepted it than have boasted of it.

In the light of a kerosene lamp he sat at his desk in the back of the store, calmly, serenely; like an effigy carved from wood. The dingy, teeming dawn with its chill breeze and atmosphere of storm might have depressed another man, as it did, indeed, depress Albrecht Sansebeare who, having been awake most of the night fearing the fire, now labored in his stable, disgusted with the rain; but Ruggles refused depression as he refused exultation, or anger, or affection. He was princely—like a wooden effigy.

Brade came clumping up the steps of the store, scraping mud from his boots as he did so. His granite face was never so impassive; his eyes never so dead; and yet never was he so grotesquely the embodiment of deadly menace as in these hours of stern

duty. Impassively he rattled at the handle of the door; and with deadly composure he awaited the opening of it.

Deeds of violence and breakage of the law are fraught with the most unreasonable hazards. hardly fair to the ambitious criminal that, however carefully his plans are laid, his care is not enough. He must be ready to readjust those plans, and his readjustment must fit with the finesse of highest engineering into that part of the scheme which is left Already the edge had been taken off unchanged. this affair as far as Dan Brade was concerned by the mutability of Gunlock's mind. Brade would have been happiest if the job had been done at their first coming, and he now at his cards in Oklahoma City's Vaguely, in the amorphous hospitable tenderloin. fabric of his thoughts, he sensed the peril that lay in this long waiting; in the notoriety that he and his comrades had attained. Now the rain had come to douse the fire which was to have held pursuit away (for an exultant hour he had hoped it might even banish all possibility of detection; all of Marbrek and its clearings in one fell swoop); and also the rain canceled that part of the plan which was to have drawn the old man away to his "study" on the river bank. Brade felt it imperative to get Ruggles away from the store somehow, for the store was all too near the man's home. (There was a girl, he remembered, and women were given to shrieking in such eventualities as he prepared.) Also there were other buildings near. So he had designed new lures,

and as he strode with his companions through the woods they decided upon the horses as a bait.

Thus, philosophically, Brade used the very draw-back of their scheme in the public eye to bolster his machinations; for notable among the appurtenances which made them the butt of Marbrek's comment was the span of fine horses which Gunlock had provided them. Shrewdly, with a cold contempt that pervaded every thought he entertained of his fellow men, Brade calculated how eagerly old Ruggles would rise to the bait of those horses. He rattled the door latch. Serenely the old man came to the door and greeted the westerner.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good mawnin'," drawled Dan.

"This is a very early call you are making," observed Ruggles.

"I reckoned I'd come to you, Mr. Ruggles," he said, "because it's like this. Me and my partners, we're splittin' up."

Ruggles acknowledged the assertion with a nod. What had the affair to do with him?

Well, it was like this: They were splitting up because somehow they couldn't hardly live together, not exactly agreeing, if Ruggles understood. . . . Grandly the old man inclined his foolish, venerable head. But these here partners of Brade's, they wanted their money, and they wanted it right quick, because Jimmy, he allowed as how he'd go down the river that morning and leave these parts for good. . . Further assurances that Ruggles understood

were given with further inclinations of the beard, and Brade watched his quarry with the dead eyes of a serpent. . . . But when we came up to these parts away, we sort o' pooled all our cash, and now Jimmy he wants his money back. . . . In the simple but canny mind of the old man a vague perception of Brade's meaning was taking form, and Brade, with clairvoyant prescience, interpreted it. . . .

"He's thinking Jim's in a hurry to leave these parts, and that we want him to loan us the money," he scoffed in his mind, and a wry twist of his lips betrayed his scoffing.

"Now mostly that money's in a pair o' hawses we all got for ourselves down the line," he said aloud, "and we was thinkin' that probably you all might be interested to get a look in on them hawses. They're right smart li'l hawses, and we shore do need the money."

He was right. It had been a shrewd bait, and the old man rose to it. "Where are they?" he asked grudgingly; but Brade could see that he rose to it.

Now mark the cunning of the murderer's lure. Here were three disreputable characters, at least one of whom ardently desired to leave the clearings quickly; and they needed money. To get that money they would sell the finest pair of horses north of Prince Albert. A forced sale. It was an opportunity not to be lost. True the police ought to know of the man's going, but one might as well have the horses first, and a song would no doubt buy them.

"Where are they?" asked Ruggles, striving for an

effect of indifference; but, with the sound of those words, Brade knew that he had him hooked.

"Why they're right down the trail a-piece," he drawled, deeply conscious of the need for haste. The fact is we tried to come over by that there short cut from our place an' got a mite stuck. If you'll just come on down. . . . We sort of need the money right quick. . ."

Yes, Ruggles would come. He would put on his tarpaulin coat and come immediately; and Brade, rigid in the doorway, suppressed a fury of impatience until the old man reappeared. All right so far, however. Not a sign of life in the clearings. Not a sound. Nobody up yet, most likely. There was only the unabating rainfall, rustling in the trees. Dakota Dan Brade loosened the buttons on his mackinaw coat and patted himself with a dainty pat beneath his armpit. Silent, unmoving, save for that.

Ruggles came forth in his quiet dignified manner, as an ambassador might have come forth to proceed to a world debate. His great black beard was square upon the shining black of his tarpaulin coat. He had assurance in his bearing and majesty upon his brow.

"This way," said Dan, and strode forward from the foot of the steps to precede the ambassadorial figure across the clearing. One might have guessed them to be a minion leading his liege lord to portentious conferences; in reality it was a butcher leading his victim to the slaughter.

Albrecht Sansebeare, coming around the corner of

the store building, saw the two tall figures as they crossed the grove of spruce trees and merged with the mist that veiled the body of the forest. He saw them enveloped by that mist so that they melted into it rather than receded from his view, and he stood leaning against the house, wagging his dripping mustache, morosely wondering what took the old man away so early in the morning, and where, in view of this contingency, he was to procure a needed buckle for his dilapidated harness.

He still stood there, no doubt debating in the obscurity of his thoughts upon the wisdom of following Ruggles with his trivial desire, when Geoffrian rode up. He came out of the mist as the others had vanished into it. Heralded by the splash of his horse's hoofs in the mud, he suddenly loomed up before the bewildered peasant; a monstrous centaur shape prancing in the dimness. This shape emerged from the fogs of morning in a series of great leaps which brought it before Sansebeare's startled eyes in the apparition of a scarlet-clad rider upon a shining horse. Drenched with the rain and chafed by the night chill, Geoffrian's face was rosy as a boy's, and his dark, firm countenance appeared, in truth, very young, despite the flame of resolution in it.

"Ruggles!" he cried, "Where is he?" But the somber Sansebeare was not to be so entreated. These things were too much for him. One at a time he could have dealt with them, but coming swiftly one upon another they were too much for him. He gazed upon the drenched rider, conscious of the scarlet coat,

but bewildered because the wearer was not Corporal Scott. And those others, they of the La Bret clearing, had taken Ruggles away . . . and swiftly upon their departure this strange policeman had come. It was amazing. He gazed at Geoffrian, wagging his mustache. It was too much.

"Is he here? Is he up yet? I must see him!" cried the red coat, with an authority in his voice that, Sansebeare gathered, boded some one ill. And a light glimmered upon the density of his mind; and the density of his mind slowly absorbed that light. A strange red coat, a red coat from somewhere else was seeking Ruggles in haste, and in stern authority. But Ruggles had gone away at an unearthly hour with that man of the La Bret place. Could not this red coat be hunting for the men who had taken Ruggles away at the unearthly hour? Was not this strange red coat in search of the La Bret men? That unspeakable Mendlesohn.

Not flashing thoughts, these; merely glimmers which his dull mind absorbed. The red coat was seeking that Mendlesohn; but he ardently desired the fate of that Mendlesohn for himself. But the red coat was persistent and one did not play with persistent red coats.

"Speak! answer me!" persisted Geoffrian. "Where is Ruggles? I must know." His gray eyes flashed upon the miserable man. He prepared to leap from the saddle and pound the blind, locked door.

"Listen," said Sansebeare, "I will tell you." He could deal mentally with the problem no longer. It

was too much. Too complex. He capitulated. "Meestair Roogle—ah—he has gone down there. Those men from the La Bret place—he took Meestair Roogle down the short cut that goes to the La Bret plass. They have joos gone." Mentally he reviewed his remarks. Yes. They contained all the information he could offer. Enough, too; for Geoffrian was off his horse with a bound and stood before him, catching at his pistol butt.

"Where?" he cried.

"Down there," asserted Sansebeare, and pointed in the direction of the indiscernable commencement of the pathway which led to the river trail at a point near the La Bret clearing; pointed into the obscurity which had just devoured Ruggles and Dakota before his eyes.

"Show me! And quick!" cried Geoffrian, and he hustled Sansebeare before him into the sullen morning. Into the thick forest where the rain rustled and whispered with the almost intolerable apathy of nature.

CHAPTER XXXV

GEOFFRIAN IS TOO LATE

Brade, stalking like death down the crooked trail, had led Ruggles deeply into the forest until, in the murky drapery of leaves, Jimmy Mendlesohn appeared before them. Thus it had been arranged and, having come to the chosen spot, Brade dropped back, allowing the old man to pass him. Ruggles now stood in the deep confines of the woods with an efficient murderer before him and the master assassin at his back.

It had been a long and lonesome vigil that Jimmy had kept in that dark spot, for neither the old man with his years, nor Dakota with his lack of woodland experience had been able to traverse that short trail quickly. They had moved, so to speak, knee deep in a flood of vapors. The pathway had been rough so that often it was not discernible whether penetrable copses were part of the trail or not, and they had blundered in that gray darkness, having often been forced to retrace their steps. Jimmy, meanwhile, had stood in the desolation of murky forest loneliness, and cursed the hour that had thus brought him away from the comforts of his native slums. Now that Ruggles had arrived, he was impatient to have the work over with. Buck Tanner, more tractable, in his

brutal way, more philosophical, had waited further up the trail, concealed by the screening spruce which half sheltered him from the downpour. Brade and his victim had passed him as they approached the impatient Jimmy.

Discerning Jimmy in the murk, Ruggles stepped forward close to him, unexpectedly placing himself so that he obscured Jimmy's person from the view of Brade. This juxtaposition was baffling to the murderers.

"They are here?" asked Ruggles, peering into Mendlesohn's dark eyes with a frown induced by his efforts to pierce the dimness.

"Down the line," muttered Jimmy, seeking to draw away from the old man so that Brade could have his shot and he himself be free to draw his gun.

Ruggles was perplexed at the peculiar behavior of these men. In the obscurity of the retarded dawn, it is possible that he suspected evil. Certainly he was perplexed.

Towering above the stunted gunman he turned to Dan, a mild irritation upon his brow. He found Dan staring at him intently, with dead, menacing countenance, and he held a naked pistol in his hand.

"What's this?" cried Ruggles, and, swiftly summing up a situation he had known in his youth, he sought refuge with amazing quickness in closer proximity with Jimmy.

At that moment Geoffrian appeared. He had rushed down the trail with incredible speed, leaving Sansebeare far behind. Impetuously he had swung past Tanner, and appeared in the little breadth of the trail as Buck gave the alarm with a shot aimed fatuously at the red coat's back. Dan, with a quick glance backward, saw Geoffrian and then turned his gun upon Ruggles. Jimmy, leaping away from Ruggles as Dan fired, emptied his gun upon the old man, too. Pierced by a half score bullets, knowing himself for dead, Ruggles turned grandly, majestically to Brade.

"I don't understand—" he would have cried, but the blood choked him, and he fell lifeless under the rain.

The deed done, Jimmy and Brade leaped for the cover of the woods. Geoffrian, his pistol in hand, would have fired after them, but Tanner's bullets from the rear clipped the leaves about him. He leaped at the noisy source of those bullets and crashed full into Buck as the gunman arose from his crouch to take the trail after his companions. With the superhuman swiftness of combat, Geoffrian had the man by the throat and bent back across his knee in a trice, while Buck, not capable of Geoffrian's lightning coördination of mental and physical effort, struck out with his clubbed revolver.

Sansebeare, concealed in a wet cloak of aspen leaves, saw the gun leap from Buck's fist; saw Buck wrench the hand of the policeman from his throat, and tower for a moment above the red coat who fell sprawling in the wet. Geoffrian had lost his grip but his pistol was close at hand, safe on its lanyard. He groped for it and, lying there as he was, Buck pounced upon him. Sansebeare saw Buck pounce

and was amazed at the agility with which the red coat bounded to his feet and slipped aside. As he did so, Sansebeare heard a flat crack, and saw Buck's head snap back in a grotesque, jerky manner. Geoffrian had managed to place a quick blow with his fist. Buck leaned lumpishly for an instant against the bole of a tree, and Geoffrian, his pistol now firmly gripped in his right hand, sprang to the man's side. Then Buck struck with his iron. With a brief length of solid iron bar, which was his favorite weapon, he struck viciously and surprisingly at Geoffrian's head. Geoffrian dodged and fired, boring with cold lead through Tanner's ardent heart.

Then, gathering up his hat, he ran, reloading the empty chambers and replacing his gun in its holster as he did so. He ran back for his horse and immediate pursuit, oblivious of the fact that, having missed as many good chances for death as Buck's revolver had contained bullets and the menace of Buck's iron bar besides, he now sought single-handed an encounter with two men whose trade was slaughter.

He saw nothing of his late guide on the way back to the store, and took it for granted that Sansebeare had fled from the murderous scene in sheer cowardice. But is was not precisely that. The scene had in truth rocked Sansebeare's soul with fear, but also it had cleared up certain of his perplexities. Jimmy, he decided, was now legitimate game, and this foolhardy red coat would certainly be killed. So Sansebeare had gone home for his rifle, and loaded it, to fare forth for his hunting.

CHAPTER XXXVI

SO IS GUNLOCK

It did not occur to Gunlock that such intricate movements of men and women and even of a little child that had brought him to this pass were fateful movements. It is given only to poets, novelists and innocent bystanders to gaze upon the things that people do, observe that the slightest volitional movement of every creature must inevitably have its effect upon another, and brightly put this down to fate. Fate appeals to us as infinitely preferable to cause and effect, because cause and effect are so glaringly apparent. An apparent thing is not a romantic thing. Later on, Gunlock, to temper his blundering sequence of relentless designs with the consolation of romance, would ascribe this moment to the workings of his fate. At present, however, he could only stand frozen with dreadful realization in the doorway of the La Bret shack and see his hired murderers return from their labors. He knew only that he had come too late!

He had fought this moment off for twelve hardridden miles in dark and storm, rain-beaten and swung, lurching, in his saddle. That his designs could come to this; defeat, disgrace, and corporal punishment! He could not admit it because he could not endure the admission. To exchange the golden rewards, the power and the glory of success for the life of a hunted murderer was not to be thought of. 'All his hatred and intolerance for living beings who were obstacles to his desire burned in him with the glare and heat of a banked furnace. They could not have him down! They would not!

He clenched his jaws in an agony of desperate resolve as he lurched in the saddle and drove his mare forward. Damn them! Blast them! Confound them! He hurled malediction and defiance into the teeth of the storm; hatred for all humanity. He would cheat them yet. He would stop this killing and leave with his gunmen for the border. That woman was the cause of it all. Confound her too. Confound her in particular. Drenched, he surged through the dark, through the downpouring rain transfigured in an exhuberance of rage and desperation.

So he had come to the La Bret place, forcing his mare to the door, and dismounting heavily in the murky morning to pound upon the side of the shack and shout. But his heart was constricted with dread as he did so. His breath was forced in and out of him by a pressure he could not control.

"Come out!" he roared. "Come out!" he panted. "Come out! It's off! It's off! Don't kill the old man now!" Pounded on the side of the house like a madman, until he heard the spatter of shooting far off in the veil of the downpour, and turned to stand in the

doorway transfixed with the realization that he had come too late!

Dan Brade and Jimmy came out of the woods at a dogtrot and crossed the clearing so that he could see vaguely the movement of their bodies weaving through the tangled underbrush. They made a bee line for the barn where the splendid span of horses, that had lured the old man to death were waiting, harnessed for their ride. Seeing Gunlock standing like a tragic statue in the doorway, they stopped short.

Jimmy vomited forth a stream of curses. Double crossed! he guessed. Dakota's hand flashed to his armpit, but something about the tragic face of Gunlock arrested him.

"There's a cop!" he cried out suddenly with a strange shrill note in his usually dead, flat voice.

"Oh God!" exclaimed Gunlock, deeply. Then: "Did you do it? I came to call it off. They know."

Then, standing gigantic above them in the leaden shadow, he suddenly poured denunciation upon them.

"You beat him up!" he thundered. "That little kid! That child! You beat him out of his senses, out of his mind; and he heard everything we said. Well, you'll hang for it, now. He told 'em, and I came out here too late!"

He was galvanized into action. He leaped down the steps with a terrible gleam of resolution in his eyes. Again Dan's hand slipped to his armpit and Jimmy's to his hip, but Gunlock urged them toward the barn.

"Come on!" he cried. "Come! Quick! We'll have to ride like hell!"

He threw open the doors and they ran the team out, facing it down the overgrown roadway.

"Where's Tanner?" suddenly demanded Gunlock, and he stopped with a hand on the dashboard and one on the seat, about to pull himself up. The two assassins looked at one another.

"He got sort of tangled up!" explained Dakota vaguely. "I reckon he got the cop, or the cop got him."

Gunlock nodded, considering.

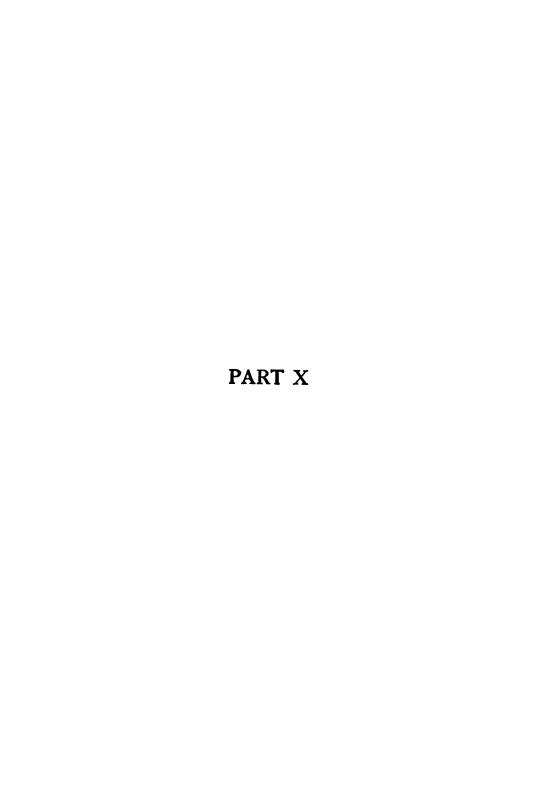
"I heard some shots later," he said. Then, with sudden hard decision, "To hell with him. We've got to get away!"

But Jimmy had seen that now they could not get away, and, following his fevered eyes, they saw Geoffrian sweeping across a far corner of the clearing. They could see only his torso, scarlet upon a horse which was hidden by the underbrush. Dakota whipped out his revolver and fired, but the scarlet rider flitted across the clearing and vanished into the woods along the river trail.

They were trapped, and well they knew it. Into the shack then! Into the shack and see every window guarded!

"There may be a lot of 'em," growled Gunlock. With an iron calmness he directed the defense of the miserable stronghold.

And Geoffrian was alone in the forest with a clearing of neglected brambles between himself and a shack defended by three men who knew that a hangman's noose awaited them if they were taken.



CHAPTER XXXVII

GEOFFRIAN DECIDES TO ADVANCE

Geoffrian had been happily oblivious of the perils involved in the tragedy which had occurred upon that restricted stage along the trail. Stimulated by the contingency, he had plunged into action with the same thoughtlessness that urges a man into icy waters to rescue a drowning child. It requires a much higher degree of heroism than that, however, to step into a cold bath on a winter's morning; and Geoffrian, so to speak, stood in the bathroom now, regarding the glistening surface of the tub.

He stood dismounted in the woods at the edge of the clearing, so that a step forward would have brought him into view of the besieged men, as a man stepping out from behind a curtain would come to view. Through the wet leaves which screened him, he could see across the spaces of the clearing and inspect the ugly, slab-sided elevation of the shack, which seemed to grovel under the impending skies.

The rain had stopped and with the alleviation of the downpour he was sensible of the discomfort of his drenched clothing; but while, with the surcease of the rain, a veil was removed from the clearing, the dimness of the morning had not abated, although now the sun must have risen fairly high. The blank

windows of the shack betrayed no sign of the inhabitants it sheltered and, as he stood watching it, the thought crept into his mind that the three men besieged there must feel some sense of inevitable arrest; some knowledge of the futility of resistence. The shack looked so silent, so unprotected, so far from ominous, that he almost involuntarily stepped forward to approach it. Yet they were desperate men.

Until that morning Geoffrian, in his nine months' service with the Mounted Police, had never been under fire. Indeed the majority of the force generally served their term of enlistment without ever encountering that experience. It was a peculiar and isolated instance when a man of the Mounted Police was fired on; and here he was up to his neck in it before his first year was over.

Vividly he remembered the tragedy of the trail... the bullets clipping the leaves about him... the gray countenance of Ruggles with the blood leaping from his mouth... that moment when, already dead, the old man had turned his fearless eyes upon the slayers... Death had not been so bad for him, reflected Geoffrian... and he pictured himself in that extreme, pierced by many bullets, and knowing the irrevocable hand of death... "This is the end," Ruggles' eyes had seemed to say—and he had renounced life very well indeed... But he had been old ... and I am not old. It makes all the difference ... and Ruggles, after all, had not had much to say about it. He hadn't had

much choice in the matter. It had been thrust upon him, so to speak, this matter of being killed . . . whereas I have distinctly a choice.

All these trifling and somewhat incoherent considerations visited Geoffrian very briefly, you will understand. It was really a form of aberration that held him there in the edge of the woods, regarding the icv plunge of desperate adventure. With another three months' training at the headquarters' school at Regina, and, say, six months' experience in the field, Geoffrian would perhaps have automatically done precisely the right thing, and kept watchfully to his cover until Scott arrived with a reinforcing posse. Perhaps: because it is problematical after all. Geoffrian could not easily have been trained to function with the automatic proficiency of the perfect policeman. As it was. it seemed to him sensible enough that he should remain spying on his quarry from this concealment; but there was in him the element of hesitation, and it seemed to challenge him.

He gazed upon the stark, dilapidated shack and saw no sign of life. Looking about him, he saw, through a ragged curtain of foliage and an interweaving tracery of branches, that a better position would be one from which he could command a view of two sides of the shack at once. He moved with great care and, gliding from this tree to that, from this concealment to that shelter, he suddenly was conscious of that care. He found himself crouching as he moved across a space less sheltered than the rest of his route, as though he were a child playing Indian.

Good Lord! he reflected, am I frightened of these men? . . .

Then why watch them from a safe concealment? Again the question arose in his mind. Was he afraid? Or, instead of a question, was it not a shameful certainty? I am afraid.

The subtleties of fear or caution or the instinct of self-protection thrust upon him in this manner without warning were too involved for Geoffrian's peace of mind.

This sort of thing is sheer idiocy, he decided. Am I to slop about in the mud like a bloomin' rabbit, with all my nice uniform on and everything, just because of a bright imagination? I say I'm a coward.

. . Good Lord! Naomi said that! She said I was a coward, and so it seems, I am. . . . Well, I'm not. Here goes.

Again he stepped forward but before he emerged from the woods he was caught by the interlacing lower branches of the spruce trees. These resilient barriers conspired with wind-fallen limbs that lay at his feet to form an inpenetrable grillwork between him and the clearing. He stood for a moment and looked through that grill.

"Watch!" he addressed the blank windows aloud, with his little smile. "Watch at your blighted windows," he said. "Watch with your guns and your battle axes and your lethal weapons. Watch the gallant red coat cross the clearing to arrest you. Very heroic, this," and he avoided the barrier to walk in a bee line across the tangled clearing.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

GEOFFRIAN'S ADVANCE IS HALTED

"S-s-s-scummin!"

Jimmy Mendlesohn voiced a sensuous pleasure in that alarm. He was half sitting on a naked pine table before the window which was screened by the tattered quilt; and a furtive, unholy glee was crackling in his lustrous eyes. He had "doped himself up" for the murder, and was keeping himself doped. In this condition danger did not exist for him. There was neither peril nor desperation in this event for Jimmy, only an unearthly glee in the excitement of killing. He clutched the pistol in his hand with fond anticipation.

"S-s-s-s-s-scummin!" The sustained sibilant pierced the silence of the shadowed room. Jimmy meant that Geoffrian was approaching the house. Through a hole in the quilt he could see the red coat coming. His exultant hiss, the first sound any one of them had uttered since Gunlock's terse orders had sent the gunmen to their places, had a galvanic effect. Gunlock, sprawled on a kitchen chair in the middle of the room, sprang, electrified, to his feet, and Dakota, who had been in frozen watchfulness at the opposite window, darted across the room like a fleet skeleton to Immy's shoulder.

"Who is it?" Gunlock's voice chimed out in the room, rather like the voice of prophecy than a question. He stood somberly gazing down at the loaded revolver in his hand.

"A cop," ejaculated Dakota briefly, and he placed a restraining hand upon Jimmy's twitching arm.

Gunlock, stolid in the center of the room, regarded the two distorted forms across the table. The little room was exceedingly dark, so that the shapes of the occupants loomed amorphously. It was dark enough in the clouded day outside, and they had increased that darkness by hanging bedding in the windows; before one a tattered blanket, before the other a torn quilt: and the air was insufferably close. The fetid atmosphere born of the men's squalid mode of living was thickened and given a dull emphasis by the pervading dampness that had followed the mist and rain. A thin, fuliginous vapor, which stung the eyes and membrane of the nose and throat, had been carried to the clearing on the winds set free with the cessation of the downpour. This herald of the distant, smoldering fires had crept into the shack and, added to the foul dankness of the room, invested the shadowed interior with an atmosphere unspeakable.

The few sticks of furniture broken by the gunmen in their brawls and scattered for the exigencies of this occasion emphasized rather than ameliorated the squalid dilapidation of the shack, and in the middle of it all, like the protagonist of some incomprehensible tragedy surrounded by the ruins of his fortune, stood Gunlock, clutching his revolver. He saw the evil

bulks of his two comrades as they lounged in the window, and in truth they seemed like two monstrous changelings. A senior devil with protecting hand upon his smaller brother's arm. There was that grotesque illusion of affection in their pose.

The illusion was shattered as Jimmy shook off Dan's restraining hand and lifted his gun up to the tattered quilt.

"Not so fairst," murmured Dan, silkily, and he tapped Jimmy lightly on the cheek with the muzzle of his own revolver. Jimmy, snarling, would have slain him like lightning, only that the grasp of a steel trap was upon his shooting arm, and the narrowed eyes of death pierced through his drugged exuberance.

"Not yet," whispered Dan, with a deaf ear for Jimmy's outpouring blasphemies. "We ain't shootin' yet."

The grating of table legs upon the floor as he pushed it out of his way announced Gunlock's arrival at their elbows. From behind them he peered through the hole in the filthy quilt, and swore at what he saw. The clearing was half obscured by a blue haze of smoke, and the murk of the heavy clouds, but above the tangled undergrowth, which covered the neglected spaces, Gunlock perceived a scarlet-coated policeman who pushed forward slowly like a man waist-deep in the sea. Slowly and carefully, with the appearance of astonishing deliberation, that figure approached the shack. In its bright, trim scarlet, it seemed the very embodiment of authority and irrevocable law. In its calm on-coming, it suggested unearthly certitude.

"Good God!" whispered Gunlock, appalled at the red coat's iron nerve. "He can't be coming here to parley!" It did not occur to him that the policemen might be coming single-handed to arrest the three of them.

"We could get a right good shot right now," suggested Dakota; but he was uneasy; the spell of the red coat was upon him. The deliberate approach of that scarlet trooper imposed a positive inhibition upon Dan's trigger finger. For the moment he could as readily have fired at God Himself.

"We could take him an' hawg tie him," he added with inspiration.

But Gunlock had arisen to his occasion. He had started out to be ruthless; and ruthlessness might yet save the day for him. A firm hand; a relentless hand, he assured himself.

This red coat might be alone. His violent death should prove that. If he were one of many others hidden in the woods, his death would bring them forth. If not, his death would clear the road for their escape. He, Gunlock, was a known murderer now; a policeman more or less would not make matters worse.

"Wait till he's close," he ordered, "then we'll all let go," and he lifted his pistol between the two men before him. "When I give the word," he said, "tear down that quilt and we'll all fire at once."

At that moment Jimmy, for the first time catching a good view of the advancing red coat's countenance, recognized Geoffrian, the friendly civilian. "S-s-s-s-py!" he hissed. "Gimme a gun, some-body!"

He made this demand oblivious of the fact that he already had a lethal weapon in his hand, and at the same moment he whipped up his pistol and fired through the window. But Geoffrian, for all the apparent foolhardiness of his advance, had been alertly watching for the movement which would precede that fire, and he dropped with the sound of it, sensibly seeking the shelter of the underbrush. Within the room Gunlock and Brade held the rampant and vituperative Jimmy, who believed he had made a hit, from faring forth to finish the job in style.

"Lemme giv'm a cupple inna guts!" he protested; but Gunlock slung him away from the door and across the room as a bull might toss a dog. Jimmy clattered upon the floor, cursing.

"Shut up!" barked Gunlock, and leaped to the window. It was a vital moment. A tiny, almost imperceptible move in the far fringe of the clearing might be all the evidence they would have to prove they were still besieged. But no such betrayal was vouchsafed them. No evidence of human life appeared in the desolation of the clearing. They seemed to be as isolated in their wretched shack as any mariner marooned upon a sand bar.

Gunlock, surveying that isolation, decided that the moment had arrived to take his chance.

"All right, boys," he murmured thickly, with his eyes still upon the clearing. "I guess we can go. I guess he was all alone."

THE RIVER TRAIL

"We finish th' dick foist?" sibilantly queried Jimmy, with his evil, glistening eyes. Gunlock stood in the doorway clamping his jaws.

"Yes!" he said. He strode to the window and tore the quilt from before the shattered pane for a last reassuring look.

"I'll swear Scott hasn't got here yet," he murmured in his deep rumble. And Naomi came hurrying across the clearing before his eyes, to bear his statement out.

CHAPTER XXXIX

JIMMY FINISHES THE JOB IN STYLE

In the details of a crime, time wields a fascinating finger. The hands of the clock are not to be gainsaid. In this particular instance it is plain that, however briefly the pen may deal with a twelve-mile ride in the darkness of dawn, twelve miles are a good twelve miles, and the night makes forest trails most difficult roads to follow. Thus we cannot lightly pass over the circumstances which brought Naomi into the clearing at that moment to assure Gunlock that his guess at Geoffrian's loneliness was true.

She had ridden to the worn roadway beside the mission with a strong desire in her to be of service in Geoffrian's adventure. It was not until that moment when she found herself astride the pony in the roadway that Naomi realized the folly of merely pursuing Geoffrian. Presuming that she overtook him, which was eminently probable since her pony knew that trail as no other animal of the clearings, of what service could she be? Obviously none. She would only have hampered him in the duty he had to perform. It is to be remembered that the hysteria of her shaken emotions had left her by this time; it had left her as the effervescing gases leave a shaken beverage, and the girl of the clearings was now as cool and clear of mind as the amber wine is clear when the bead has gone.

To pursue her lover would be to hamper him; but she knew of a thousand pathways to her father's clearing. How if she tried to double Geoffrian's efforts? To reach her father before the gunmen did? Before Geoffrian himself?

That was obviously the better way. The little winding trails of the forest would be difficult to follow, almost impossible in the black and rain-obscured darkness, but if she failed, he, following the broad river trail, would get through; if she succeeded... the thought lightened her heart with an ineffable delight. He would be proud of her then! He would forget her selfish weakness of the past if she succeeded!

So she had tried out the little, winding pathways—and had failed. What befell Naomi in the obscurity of that dawn among the rain-afflicted trees cannot be written down; but it is enough to know that she was lost. She found herself barred at every turning by the imprisoning trees and saplings. She dismounted and, stumbling, led her stumbling pony from one obscure runway to another, until she burst forth with indescribable relief and great surprise upon the river trail.

So she came to the La Bret clearing at the moment when Geoffrian, at the edge of the forest, wrestled with incomprehensible instincts. In the seclusion of the trail, before she reached the clearing, the black shape of an animal moved against the drapery of the forest. She dismounted and, approaching it, found Geoffrian's brown mare secured by its bridle to a sap-

ling. So she knew with a dull foreboding that the scene of present action was laid in this squalid clearing.

She moved through the underbrush, skirting the woods which edged the trail, and in this manner came to the edge of the clearing. Here she gazed across the gray-green undulations of the bramble bushes, and saw with a constricting heart the man in scarlet as he approached the shack. She witnessed the deliberate and unswerving advance of Geoffrian, as in the distorted world of nightmare we witness unbelievable and terrifying things. She felt her heart pumping insistently in her breast, and her chest rise and fall with the deep inspirations of her breathing; and yet she did not seem a part of the body that thus reminded her of its existence. She seemed rather an alert and singularly clear mind disassociated from that body. Vividly this mind could see the moving scarlet figure, and with an awful prescience it dwelt upon the ugly, silent shack, waiting for the inevitable shot.

It came, a dull report, and she saw the scarlet body disappear below the surface of that sea of underbrush. Then she swept forward, not conscious of the brambles which tore at her or of the enmeshed and tenuous bushes through which she plunged. She swept forward as a mother, unthinking, rushes to an afflicted child; as women will ever sweep to the aid of a wounded man who is beloved. And she was conscious, as she surged through the undergrowth, of the extraordinary eventuality which had brought her to this. That she should be involved in night rides on obscure

trails; that she should love a man who was a policeman and dressed in brilliant scarlet; a man whom people in shabby huts shot at with pistols, bringing him down. That she should be here, crossing the clearing, drenched and bareheaded, to assist him.

She was quite close to the place where he had fallen when the door of the shack opened and Jimmy sprang forth with his pistol in his hand. She divined his purpose, and, swerving from her course, rushed at him. He snarled and swore, raising the pistol, but without a sound she seized his weapon with both her hands and clung to it despite his tugging and cursing. He was scarcely taller than she, and not as heavy.

Gunlock in the doorway barked out sharply. "Don't kill her!" he warned; and with Dakota he flung himself upon Naomi to pull her away. They tore her back despite her cries, and held her; and Jimmy took a pace or two into the clearing, seeking his quarry. Geoffrian, hearing Naomi cry out, leaped to his feet, appearing like Jack-in-the-box, waist-deep in the underbrush; and at that moment the sound of a shot reverberated from the hillock. Jimmy halted for a moment, described a brief semicircle with crazy mincing steps and collapsed to the ground with a small blue hole in his forehead.

Gunlock swore. "We're surrounded!" he cried, and might have added, "after all," to convey his proper meaning.

Dakota fired one futile, hasty shot at Geoffrian, who disappeared forthwith, and then leaped to aid Gunlock who tore at Naomi's body, rushing her into the shack.

JIMMY FINISHES THE JOB

Disheveled and flushed, they got her in and barred the flimsy door; then, flinging her upon the larger chair, they sprang to the quilted window and emptied their guns furiously at the perfidious hillock.

CHAPTER XL

ALBRECHT SANSEBEARE IS SATISFIED

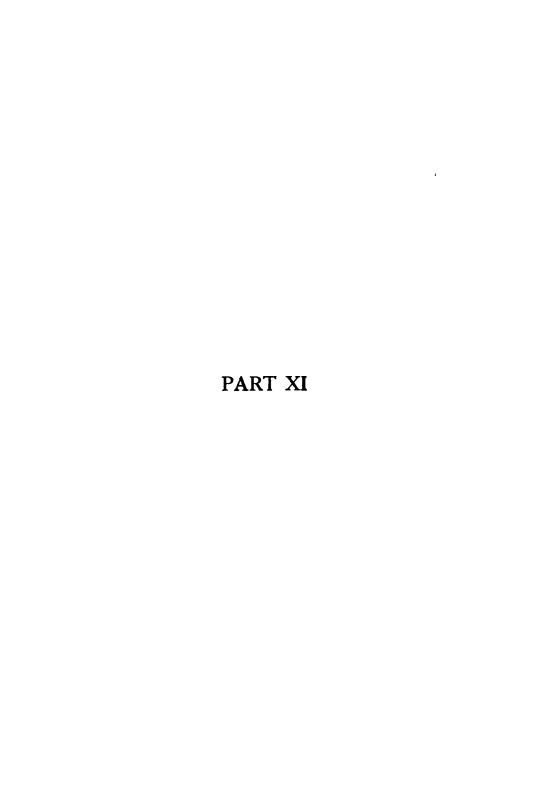
They emptied their pistols upon the brush-covered hillock on the river bank, but they wasted ammunition to no purpose, for Albrecht Sansebeare had gone home.

Albrecht had been intent upon one thing only; he simply and ardently desired the privilege of killing Jimmy Mendlesohn. Having witnessed the murder of Ruggles, he felt assured that Jimmy was now his legitimate prey, and had procured his rifle for the killing. Thereupon, praying that Geoffrian might not officiously forestall him, he had proceeded by canoe down the river until its sweeping curve brought him to the hillock overlooking the La Bret clearing. Here he had esconced himself behind protecting shrubbery and, with his rifle across his knees, waited for his moment.

Pessimistically he had witnessed Geoffrian's advance and, with doleful realization, saw him fall before the fire from the shack. He had waited apprehensively until Jimmy darted forth to finish the job in style and then raised his rifle with a glow of satisfaction. But the girl had come to complicate the matter. His rifle drooped disgustedly. But Gunlock and Dakota tore the girl away. Up went the rifle

SANSEBEARE IS SATISFIED

again. Jimmy took two paces forward and was clearly outlined against the blank wall of the shack. So Sansebeare, who was a good marksman, pulled the trigger. He saw Jimmy fall, and it was enough for Albrecht Sansebeare. His end was achieved and his dull honor satisfied. He tucked his rifle under his arm, slid stooping around the hillock and, climbing into his canoe, went home.



CHAPTER XLI

TRAPPED!

There were three in the shack once more. But the band of murderers was reduced by half, and the presence of the girl subtly emphasized the desperation of the two trapped men remaining.

There were two whole chairs in the room and she sat in the largest of them. It was an armchair crudely fashioned from heavy, hand-hewn timbers, and she occupied it with a serene composure that conflicted in an extraordinary manner with the intermingled emotions in her mind. Dakota was at the table, swinging a long leg and gazing through the torn fabric of the quilt which he had replaced before the window. was watching the forest narrowly for some sign of the besieging horde that he pictured concealed in the clean-cut wall of forest which bound the clearing. Gunlock stood with his revolver thrust in a coat pocket, feet wide apart and arms folded, staring into the room. He was supposed to be watching at the blanket-covered window directly opposite Dan's lookout, but he had no heart for the job and stood snubbing the blanket with his broad shoulders, intent upon an appreciation of this extremity of his life.

It was perhaps an ironic compensation for his contempt and inconsideration of all mankind that he should face this crisis in loneliness. There was Naomi, silent and oblivious of his presence, a girl whom he had thought to make his wife; deeply in himself he winced as the thought of marriage suggested the wretched little urchin he had left behind him on the fire line. That child might conceivably be dead now; suffocated . . . and even his own flesh and blood. Gunlock was beginning to lay the blame for all this affair on Fate.

The sight of Dakota, the consciousness of the gunman's presence in the room, irritated Gunlock with an emphasis of his deep disgust. He despised the ignoble and filthy tools which he had called upon; and unknowingly he revolted against Dakota's presence in the shack because of the inscrutable girl who shared it with them.

He considered his companions with a greater complexity of emotions than he knew; and yet he was alone, as a man must always be alone when he is with his dead. Gunlock was alone with the dead ashes of his dreams. And his dreams and his schemes for the realization of them had always meant more to him than any human being on the earth. He had planned grandly, with an incalculable egotism, only to the end that he should stand at bay in a squalid shack with this girl rebuking him with the presence of her injury and this depraved tool of his desires.

In the beginning he had projected his designs with regal arrogance; with a Nietzscheian ruthlessness which was to him superb. In those hours he had counted such men as these gunmen only as useful cat-

tle; all humanity had carpeted the stairway to his desired pinnacle of power and success. And in the end he was at bay in this shack; one with the tools of his relentless scheming; a hunted criminal such as they. A hunted, desperate animal—in the end.

He gazed somberly upon the scene of his reduction. All the pathways of his mind brought him to that same intolerable conclusion. Circular pathways, which came back to their beginnings.

A breeze intruding through the shattered window, pane, disturbed the quilt that screened Dakota's lookout. A thin rustle was heard upon the roof of the shack and a gentle hissing sound swept in from the clearing.

"'S rainin'," announced Dakota shortly. The sound of his voice broke the spell of silence that had held them for uncountable minutes. It afterward became apparent that they had held that silent interval of tense waiting and painful watching for more than two hours.

When first they had dragged Naomi into the shack with violent haste and a hurried preparation for defense, they had anticipated an imminent onslaught of the forces of law and order. This onslaught failing to develop, Gunlock had placed Dakota on watch, and had endeavored himself to discover from their hostage the disposition of the forces arrayed against them. Naomi, knowing nothing, betrayed nothing. If she had known Scott to be intrenched upon the hillock with a thousand deputies, she would never have admitted it; but since the shot that had slain Jimmy had

astonished her as much as it had astonished them, she was equally bent upon concealing her ignorance.

Gunlock had held an inquisition before her chair: but she had sat in silence utter and serene, with her wet bodice clinging to her arms and shoulders, and her hair, drying, made fluffy by the damp. He painted vividly his desperate extreme . . . if they caught him he would surely hang. And she was silent, remembering her dead father, and considering the manner of his dying. He called upon her to remember their friendship of the past; the night when, under a fair moon, he had obtained her assurance that there was no other man. And she was silent, remembering Geoffrian; how nearly she had given up that happy warrior for this selfish, ambitious man. He spoke of his love for her, asking her not to forget the protestations of those hours of his wooing. And, calling in mind the harsh eyes of Dorothy, the certain purpose which must have inspired those protestations, she gazed upon him serenely, and was silent.

Then he bullied her, striding up and down the wretched room. She would tell him! She must tell him! Good God! She couldn't sit there and see them die like rats in a trap; and if they did, she need not think she would profit by it. Look at Brade! Look at him there in the window! Did she think that her lily-livered policeman could take that man alive? or him either? He himself! He would never be taken alive; and he would not go without settling up with Geoffrian. "If you keep us playing about here!" he cried. "He is sure to die. You can count on that!

It will come to a finish fight, and nothing will save him then. Or Scott."

He leaned over her chair, glaring into her disdainful, hazel eyes. "Come now! If Scott is not there; if there is no posse surrounding us, let us know. Tell us and we will ride for it. That's a small enough request. We will ride for it, and get out of the country without bloodshed. Without the slightest danger to Geoffrian or any other policeman. Think of that!"

She thought in silence and it enraged him. He cried out; bawled out, in a great, reverberating out-burst of rage.

"Then damn you!" he bawled. "We'll kill your damned tin soldier! They may get us, but we'll kill him if it's the last shot we take!"

And he had shut up to go off, glowering, to his window. They had waited in restless watching for two hours. Every one of the hundred and twenty minutes they had expected the attack to come, had expected the hand that had lain Jimmy low to project its fire at their stronghold. But nothing had occurred. So Gunlock had glowered in the silence, forming abortive plans for quick rushes for the horses, which he abandoned before the swift picture of himself falling dead as he emerged from his squalid stronghold. Then the rustle and swish of the rain had come, and Dakota had broken the spell of the silence with his voice.

Outside the clouds were black and dimly opaque. The rain fell dismally in the clearing and the day was invested with the dusk of gloaming; yet it was not noon. Within, the ragged curtains of bedding accentuated the murk of the day so that it was almost as potent as night's blackness. Naomi in her chair, her heart and mind brightly upon her lover, and uplifted by an unreasoning optimism, had the appearance of a misty apparition which was only head and shoulders. Dakota was rather a presence than a tangible body, and, but for the occasional movement of his head against the dim, unillumined loopholes in the quilt, that presence could only have been felt. The ponderous body of Gunlock was a lumbering shadow in a nebulous realm of shadows.

"I don't believe there's anybody out there. Nobody watching us at all," rumbled Gunlock slowly. He was giving expression to the pith of the matter which had occupied his mind.

"Me too, boss," drawled Dakota; and without seeing one another's faces, the certain knowledge flashed from one man to the other, across that murky room, that each knew the other's mind. Each had been considering silently the chances for escape, and only the lack of a corroborating mind had made the fleeting plans of each abortive.

"If we don't make for it now," elaborated Gunlock, "we won't ever make for it." Dakota continued to regard the distant wall of forest.

"There ain't nobody goin' to stand in our way that I can see," he ventured; yet he had no great faith, and he possessed an animal's fear of rushing forth from concealment to be shot down like an animal. He was merely feeling Gunlock out.

"We could go through this window," said Gunlock.
"They'd watch the door." A silence of minutes followed while the rain hissed and rattled about their stronghold. Again Dakota broke the spell.

"If they're watchin', we ain't got much chance anyway," he said. "An' the door is a sight closer to them there hawses."

In a sense he was reluctant to press the matter, for after all the clearing might be watched. But in the long hours of watching he had turned over in his mind remarks that Gunlock had let drop. Darkly he regretted the enthusiasm which had brought him to this uncivilized land, where, it appeared, a self-respecting gunman might be hung. Passionately he desired to avoid that dread eventuality. It was in his legend that he should die with his boots on. Anyway, between a dash for escape and a surrender, cornered. the choice should be obvious enough. The surrender comprised a fair assurance of intolerable legalities with a hangman's noose at the end of days in durance The dash for escape, on the other hand, might prove successful, wherefore no consideration of dying in any manner whatsoever need be entertained. to a show-down, indeed, and he could take his oath that no one watched them from those woods. Still, the memory of Jimmy, mincing in his deviating dance of death, was not a happy one.

"I'll open the door, quick," said Gunlock; and Dakota realized that the rush for escape was now ordained. "When I do, you jump for the buckboard, and I'll be right with you. If they fire, we'll drop in the brush and try to fight it out." He, a Canadian, with a full knowledge of the absurdity of his words, said these things in cold, deliberate accents. . . . "We'll try to fight it out." They might as well have decided to fight their way through a ring of policemen from the Hotel Cecil in London. In his heart Gunlock knew that, if they were indeed surrounded, all

was up with him. But the chance was worth taking. "Yo' mean I go first?" drawled Dan, cannily.

Gunlock gazed upon him stolidly for a moment.

"We'll both go together," he said . . . "when I throw open the door."

"An' what about the dame?"

Gunlock frowned. It had occurred to him as well. Frowning, he turned his gaze upon Naomi.

"You'll have to stay here," he said to her. "You'll have to stay here till they come. And will you play fair, then? Will you give us a square deal, and keep quiet when they ask you questions?"

She arose to her feet and looked upon him with unlagging composure and disdain.

"Don't think of me in your plans," she said in her low, contralto voice. "I have nothing to do with you. Nothing."

He came close to her and bent his head so that she could see the determination of his purpose gleaming in his eyes.

"I am asking you to give us your promise that you will stay here," he said. "Stay here till they come, and say nothing. Will you do that? Will you promise to say nothing?"

"You ought to know better than to ask me that," she replied. "You have killed my father, haven't you?" she paused for an instant, overwhelmed with a sudden realization of what that meant. A lonely homestead now; a silent kitchen; a beloved companion gone. When she resumed, her voice was more constrained, more bitter. "You haven't hesitated to harm me, have you?" But his eyes never flinched before her accusing gaze. He was too strong a man for that; too essentially the egotist. "I'll give you no promise!" she said.

And without raising his voice he replied to her: "Then we'll bind you."

She stood without flinching, and betrayed nothing in the serenity of her countenance.

"I'll do all I can to help him," she said, and again unreasonable optimism uplifted her. She was referring to her redcoat; and she knew he could not fail.

Gunlock placed a vicelike hand upon her arm. "Get a line," he said, and Dakota was at his side with a heavy cord.

"Tie down her arms. To her sides," ordered Gunlock; but Naomi protested.

"No!" she cried. "Don't let him touch me!" She cringed from Dakota's touch with an almost involuntary movement. "He is a snake!" she cried; and Gunlock was startled at the yellow light which flashed for a moment in her eyes.

Dakota stood back with a wry twist of his lips. Vaguely he felt a thrill of pride at the spectacle of the repulsion he engendered. "Then stand still," growled Gunlock.

Suddenly snatching the cord from Dakota's hand he slipped the noose that the gunman had prepared over Naomi's head. It fell upon her shoulders and with a brisk gesture he ran it down to her middle with both his hands. As she involuntarily cried out and moved her arms, he pulled the noose tight, binding her wrists at her side, and then twisted the line around and about her, so that in a moment she was fairly and tightly trussed.

After that first involuntary cry, she stood there, silent in the dark, and allowed him to bind her. The impotent dignity of her silence had in it the essence of pathos, and Gunlock was sensitive of the enormity of his deed. It was as though he deliberately and shamefully maltreated a dumb child. It was uncanny. But he bolstered his embarrassment with a rigid consideration of his own predicament, and thoroughly finished his work. He bound her arms tightly to her sides and then, with the loose end of his line, he knelt to shackle her feet.

Dakota had returned to his window, watchful for the coming of disaster.

"Make it fairst," he whispered from time to time.

So Gunlock found himself kneeling in an ocean of darkness at the feet of the girl he had courted; for whom he had once conceived a vague affection founded upon a definite respect. In a wry and singular manner this deep respect for her now welled up in him; an obeisance, it was, in an admiration which the

clean and courageous spirit of the girl commanded, and which couldn't be subdued. So he bound the two small leather boots closely together with a tender and solicitous regret, as a disciple might have handed the philosopher the fatal hemlock cup. He knelt at her feet and bound them.

"Make it fairst!" came Dakota's insistent whisper. He arose. All this had consumed seconds. It seemed to him he used years in the fulfillment of it. He was gazing down into the clear pools of her hazel eyes once more.

"I won't forget this, Ralph," she said.

"Make it fairst! Make it fairst!"

Dakota's unceasing urgency recalled Gunlock to his desperate predicament. He ransacked the shadows of the room with his gaze for a moment, seeking material to finish his shameful work. He finally had resort to the hem of her skirt. Stooping, he tore it away and, arising, strapped it about her mouth with a brusque gesture that took her completely by surprise. He was thorough, was Gunlock.

She now stood before him bound and gagged, clearly rebuking him and condemning him with her eyes. He felt that contempt and knew he merited it, but he had a way to see his plans through in spite of that. With the urgency of the situation pressing upon his mind, he overrode his compunction by swift assault upon the action he conceived to be necessary. With a peculiar abruptness he had slung the noose over those shapely shoulders, which, in face of her contempt, he would otherwise have scarcely dared to

touch, and in the same manner he had bound and gagged her. Now, his face ugly with the knowledge of his predicament, but in his heart distasteful of the action, he suddenly picked her up as though she were a bundle of cast-off clothing, and carried her into the other room; the inner closet where Robert had lain upon the same foul bedding where Gunlock now laid Naomi.

That was done. Gunlock clenched his teeth. It was not his way to deal with women in that manner, but somehow, anyhow, he must escape the peril of the hangman's noose.

He was out of the blackness of the little room, and with his exit left his compunction and regret behind him. Again he had entered the dim realm of shadows where Dakota and his destiny awaited him.

"We gotta make it fairst," enunciated the gunman.

It occurred to Gunlock in one of those flashes, which gave him the foresight that provided every detail, that two men, pressing at great haste through the clearings, would be conspicuous if neither of them wore a hat.

"Get your hat!" he snapped, and groped on the floor beneath the armchair for his own. Dakota protested and, groping desperately, Gunlock silenced him.

"Get it!" he ordered.

After interminable seeking, they stood at the door with their hats on.

"Keep clear," warned Gunlock thickly. He drew

TRAPPED!

back the bolt with tremendous care. "I'll sling it back quickly, and we both run for it. . . . Now!"

He flung back the door, and a scarlet body was at Dakota's throat.

"Christ!" shrieked Gunlock, and despair, distraction, the foreknowledge of an awful doom was in his voice.

3

CHAPTER XLII

GUNLOCK'S EDIFICE COMES DOWN

When Dakota, distracted at the vision of Jimmy's sudden death, had discharged his revolver in Geoffrian's general direction, Geoffrian had wisely dropped to earth once more. Thus he was concealed no further than six yards from the corner of the shack, when, having dragged Naomi in, Gunlock drove home the bolt. Thereupon Geoffrian slid to the steps and had sat there, waiting developments.

In the end, he decided, they must come out. If they were sensible, they would come out quickly. That would be their only chance; the only possible opportunity for them to get away before Scott came. They must make a break for it soon. When they did; when the door opened for them to come out, he would go in.

A rustle disturbed the landscape, and a sprinkle of rain fell upon Geoffrian. Refusing to exchange the damp discomfort of his half dry clothing for the exhilerating wetness of a thorough drenching, Geoffrian stood erect and close to the door of the shack, finding shelter in the overhang of the roof.

"'S rainin'," he heard Dakota announce and, with his ear close to the door, heard all else which followed that announcement.

GUNLOCK'S EDIFICE COMES DOWN

Thus, when Gunlock flung open the door, he was prepared with a high heart for the encounter.

His scarlet body shot forward, and with his revolver in one hand he gripped Dakota's throat with the other. This was not an involuntary movement. In the moment he flung himself forward to that combat, and in the successive moments which followed, his mind worked with incredulous swiftness and calculated agility. A succession of pictures fleeted before him and he visualized and appreciated each perilous situation, nailed it to the post of imperative decision, and dealt with it.

As the door swung open, there, like a transient vision, was Dakota, thin-lipped, with gun in hand, prepared to rush forth into the clearing; and Gunlock behind him, a hand still upon the door. In the midst of swift movement, in the velocity of his leap forward, Geoffrian's mind instructed him. Fling Dakota backward, away from you, so that you may cover both with your gun at once! And he clutched Dakota's throat with his bent arm, flinging the man backward as he himself drew up his revolver.

Gunlock at the same instant gave forth his despairing cry, and plunged into action. Springing at the red coat, he met Dakota's body in its backward course, and Geoffrian was thus catapulted by the impetus of his rush upon the body of the man he had flung from him. The three bodies jammed together for an instant, and Geoffrian felt Dakota's gun against his body. His hand pounced upon it quickly; before the gunman's finger pressed the trigger, the gun was

wrenched from his hand, and Dakota himself hurled against the table which collapsed beneath him. Geoffrian, exalted in this effort, whirled and flung the revolver through the door far out into the clearing.

Gunlock, at the edge of the open door, swore loudly, snatched his revolver from his pocket, and, as Dakota reeled backward, and Geoffrian whirled toward the door, he blazed away at the agile scarlet form. But Geoffrian moved in a frenzy of intelligent action. As the fire leapt from Gunlock's weapon, the red coat pounced upon the heavy chair and, swinging about, mashed Gunlock against the door with it. Gunlock went down, his weapon flung far into the room. The door slammed and black darkness fell.

With the slam of the door, Geoffrian dived almost headfirst into the corner beside the blanket-covered window and beneath it. He whisked about, facing the room. Up went his revolver; but he found that he faced an expanse of shadows which adumbrated all form and substance in the room and clothed the floor with blackness. 'At that instant a red flame stabbed the darkness opposite him and a splinter flew from the wall behind. Dakota had snatched up Gunlock's revolver, and had found Geoffrian's range. Instantly Geoffrian fired upon the point where, in his bedazzled eyes, the stab of fire still lingered, and leaped at the crack of his gun away from his position. A moment of deathly silence followed, then Dan, encouraged, fired thrice, making a beautiful row of bullet marks along the floor two inches from the wall Geoffrian had so precipitately left. Having moved himself, Dakota showed Geoffrian a new mark and at this the red coat fired, thriftily, once. Instantaneously came Dan's answering shot, but Geoffrian had plunged across the room, seeking grips with him. As he leaped forward, he catapulted into Gunlock, who had been groping about the wall to reach him. Gunlock swore, grunting, but the surprise was to Gunlock's advantage, for Geoffrian, caught low, went down. As he fell, with that supersense of every slightest detail of the struggle, he heard Dakota swearing as he found his pistol empty and the shells he carried unfitted for it. Dakota threw the useless weapon away and dived at the new sound of conflict.

Geoffrian went down as a football player tackled low by his antagonist. He somersaulted across the room, and his pistol, catching upon Gunlock's crooked elbow, was torn from its lanyard and clattered to the floor. Dakota and Gunlock, ignoring the policeman then, groveled feverishly for the weapon.

Geoffrian, leaping to his feet, saw their bodies in the murk, groping about the floor like animals, and he stood for an instant undecided. Suddenly it occurred to him that he must attack lest they find the gun, and he leaped upon the nearest groping form. It was Gunlock, and Geoffrian pulled the man down, striking mightily with his fists for the vulnerable spot behind the ear. Gunlock, a weighty bulk, twisted beneath him, threw him off, and, his hand finding a casual revolver on the floor, he snatched it up and pressing it against Geoffrian's body pulled the trigger;

but it was the revolver Dakota had used, and it was empty.

Gunlock cursed, and being free for an instant from his antagonist, arose and tried for Geoffrian's head with the revolver butt, clubbed. He missed the head, getting Geoffrian's shoulder with a fatuous thud. Geoffrian, with a familiar knowledge of the gentle art, drove forth with his fist, but Dakota's lean arm came about his throat from behind and Dakota's knife was raised over his chest as his head was twisted back.

Dakota was short-winded, and he had fought without any other sound but his harsh panting. Now,
with his arm about Geoffrian's throat, however, he
made a chirping, gibbering sound. It was a sound of
triumph. But on the whole it was bad teamwork on
Dakota's part, for Gunlock was amuck with the
clubbed gun. He tried three times for Geoffrian's
head with it, and at the third blow felled Dakota as
the man's knife was suspended on the peak of its
downward plunge. "Ai!" squeaked the gunman, as
he fell, and his knife clattered into the oblivion of
darkness.

Again Gunlock cursed as he flung the gun away, so that Geoffrian, with the man's fingers clutching his throat, heard the clank of the metal as it fell to the floor near the doorway. Gunlock's hands grasped his throat, and Geoffrian felt his windpipe close under the terrible fingers, but his hands were free, and his mind coolly directed a series of blows dealt, shortarmed, upon the distorted face before him. In the turmoil and the frenzy he enjoyed those lusty blows,

and enjoyed the hazy sight of Gunlock, quailing beneath them. Gunlock's hands flew from Geoffrian's throat and, with magical promptitude, Geoffrian moved to a defense of his middle as the man's great paws attacked him there.

Given light, and with Dakota definitely out of it. what followed might have proved a well-matched bout with the naked fists. Gunlock had the advantage of weight, but, like most believers in the manly art of self-defense, knew nothing whatever about it. Geoffrian, who didn't believe in it at all, judging in sane moments that brute force was neither manly nor artistic, was nevertheless a practiced boxer. He held that proficiency in fighting was nothing for an adult male to boast about, but it was nice to be able to lick other fellows who did. And in his practice he added to a well-conditioned body a quick and imaginative mind. These virtues would have more than offset Gunlock's advantage of superior weight and brute force, had either of the combatants been able to see clearly his opponent or the movements of his opponent. They could place their blows only by feel; and in that extremity the heaviest blows were the best. Gunlock had the heaviest blows, and Geoffrian had delivered several swings to the head before he found that out. With his brain singing, Gunlock drove a left jab home to Geoffrian's chest, and Geoffrian, feeling that a pile driver had been unfairly used against him, reeled backward into the misty realm of semiconsciousness. Gunlock plunged forward, following the matter up, and ran foul of Dakota who, arisen

as though from the dead, sought vengeance, and his knife.

"W'ere in hell is he?" asked Dakota.

Before the gunman laid hands on the vanished knife, Geoffrian, recovering with the swift recovery of good training, reminded Dakota of his whereabouts with a vigorous punch on the front of the jaw that set Dakota flailing the air in anger. Evading Gunlock's rush, ducking, dancing, rattling blows upon the two of them, Geoffrian plunged about the room. Yet even as he dodged this way and that, swung vainly, struck blows which more often glanced their mark than punished it; took a blow too, now and then, which jolted his body or his brain; even as he fought, thus evading them, Geoffrian knew it could not last. He knew that very quickly it must come to a clinch. He himself held in the grasp of one of these men while the other beat him into insensibility.

No! He was alive and fighting! There was still a chance!

Gunlock, in a frenzy, his loud grunts and vicious oaths filling the shack, pressed him hard. Another of Gunlock's great, pile-driver blows pounded upon Geoffrian's throat, and Geoffrian gave back a salvo of body blows with all his might; blows which he felt smash home against the thick body of the man, but which left him gasping for breath himself. Gunlock seemed undismayed and pressed forward, snarling, grasping at Geoffrian's body, feeling for the clinch. Geoffrian evaded that, and rebounded into Dakota's clutching arms. Madly he struck at the tall man's

face, and Dakota doubled up like an urchin, turning away from him. Gunlock from behind clutched at Geoffrian's face, and he twisted away, smashing at the body of Dakota who followed him. Then Geoffrian trod upon some object and, his ankle twisting, he all but fell. Dakota, clawing at his face, his throat, his nostrils, nearly had him then, but bunching his body, Geoffrian shot upward, landing a blow with his knuckles and with all his weight and strength behind it on the point of Dakota's chin. It was a cracking. shocking blow, and swiftly upon its impact the sharp pain of broken bones shot up Geoffrian's arm; but it felled Dakota, who went down noisily like a fallen skeleton. And Gunlock was upon Geoffrian with the heavy remnants of the shattered timber chair.

Geoffrian saw it in a quick glimpse as he crouched after his blow; the bulky murderer looming above him with the heavy timbers of the chair back brandished high; and he dodged, wincing at the sound of the impact as the chair rent the planks of the floor. Up went the chair again, and still Geoffrian crouched, groping on the floor for the object he had trodden upon, twisted his ankle upon. That object was a revolver; and it was his revolver, because he had heard the gun Dakota had emptied drop beside the door when Gunlock threw it. The revolver at his feet had two unexploded cartridges in it!

Up went the heavy chair again, and again Geoffrian dodged; but the twisted ankle failed him, and he slewed around, falling over the prostrate form of Dakota. Desperately he groped with hands and legs and feet for that revolver. Down came the chair on Geoffrian's head, glancing to the shoulder. He arose, dizzy, swaying. He staggered forward. The end! Was this the end? And he felt Dakota rising behind him, clutching at him. Down again came Gunlock's weapon; viciously the big man tried to kill. Down! Missing the head this time, but a staggering blow. And Dakota, cursing, felled the red coat with a blow of his fist on the unprotected face.

Down tumbled Geoffrian, and Gunlock and Dakota flailed the floor with separate parts of the same great chair, seeking to finish the job with bloody murder. But Geoffrian had fallen on the revolver: the revolver with two live cartridges in it: and while the blows rained thick and fast upon his body and the floor about him, he raised it against one maniac form above him and fired. Gunlock, shot through, fell bloodily across him, and, Dakota, dazed, stopped his maniac threshing to kick the body out of his way for a final blow at Geoffrian. If he had accomplished that, it is even betting whether Geoffrian would have finished him with that last cartridge, or whether Dakota would have brained Geoffrian with his shattered timber. But even as the chair leg was upraised for the finishing blow, the door crashed open and five men tore Dakota Scott had entered the shack with Malcolm, Parrot and two others, and the fight was over.

Geoffrian, thinking he saw his enemy augmented by thenewcomers, blazed away into the air, almost chucking Corporal Scott under the chin with his enthusiastic bullet, and collapsed forthwith into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XLIII

GUNLOCK ACCEPTS FINALITY AGAIN

Dakota in manacles. Geoffrian prostrate. Gunlock a choking heap. Naomi released.

An interval during which Corporal Anthony Scott dealt with his notebook, asking Naomi respectful questions and curtly questioning Dakota. Scott was humbled before his notebook, seeing in the paper and pencil an inscrutable link with forces higher up and far away; forces which dealt with forms. He furrowed his brow and put his questions, jotting down with pains the information he procured. He examined the room, and the inarticulate Gunlock, jotting down recondite and weighty findings. While he made these examinations, the prisoners were in charge of the four deputies whom Scott had chosen upon the fire line to accompany him.

The rain had stopped the fire, but the fire line had not been abandoned until a barrier of almost liquid mud lay between the threatened clearing and the smoldering devastation of the flames. But the rain had also sent an exhausted man back to a point in the forest where he had left a wagon. This toiler of the clearings had stumbled thither to see in what condition his most important property had survived the downpour. His mind, fevered with the menace

of the forest fire, had not consciously hitched those horses in a sheltered spot, so that he could not remember in what manner he had left them. Vaguely he recalled an urchin whom they had abandoned with the wagon, and, knowing a horse's mad fear of flames, he dwelt with foreboding on the utter improbability of the child controlling them, if, unhaltered, they ran amuck.

He knew the course they would take. With equine aberration they would plunge into the heart of the fire; and those horses constituted all the salable property which he and his wife and children possessed after an age of toil. So he was glad to find his wagon in its place.

And again Robert was aroused from his death-like slumbers into a dank, overclouded world full of the stench of smoldering woodlands. A world of harsh ugliness enwreathed in mists and vapors. A world which made him weep copiously because of the gasses in the air. So he sped another of his elfin messages onward and went to sleep again. The message was carried on to Scott, a begrimed commander in the muddy desolation of his toil; and in the murky morning they rode on Malcolm's buckboard to the clearing.

Malcolm, it was, who had released Naomi from her bonds with a birdlike solicitude. He bore out the sensation Gunlock had experienced, that in binding her he outraged the helplessness of a child, in that releasing her he did so with the solicitude of one ministering to an ill-used infant. But, her bonds removed, Naomi became at once a woman, extremely, self-possessed.

"Is he injured?" she inquired, without excitement in her tone. They stared at her. "Geoffrian!" she explained. And it was Parrot who rose to the occasion.

"He's damn well knocked about," he said apologetically, as though he had dropped some precious pieces of china. "But nothing serious, I think. I don't! Upon my soul!"

She strode into the room, and directly to Geoffrian, whom they had laid upon a frowzy cot.

"Give me light!" she requested. "Please, somebody." Malcolm tore the bedding from the windows, while another brought a lantern to the cot and placed it upon the remaining chair where its yellow glare strove against the dim, gray light of the afternoon.

Scott came and questioned her, and she stood up, answering his questions directly and coolly, giving him a clear story of the morning's events. She spoke with particular precision of what had conceivably preceded the melodrama on the clearing, because she felt once more the cold sinking of her heart when she referred to it.

"I think they must have killed my father first," she said, her red lips trembling, and a shadow sweeping woefully across her brow. "Back at the house, I think." And she turned to Geoffrian again, tearless, and bravely cool.

She loosened his clothing, and arranged his sprawling limbs, while Malcolm pottered about beside her.

Fearing, and yet unafraid, she sought for a wound which might be fatal or a fracture which might cripple him; and her heart sang at the discovery that, except for some minor fractures and abrasions, his body was sound and whole.

While she was so deeply occupied, Scott shot his questions at Dakota, but the man stood in a daze, knowing only that he must say nothing; make no sound whatever. Scott gave him up, and appraised the room.

"Ye'll keep y'r eye on this man, Parrot," he instructed. "I've to inspect the clearin' and the scene o' the cr-rime. Gunlock there, I misdoubt will n' last over long." (He had examined Gunlock's wound briefly; Gunlock's wound demanded no profound examination.) "I'll return as soon can be, and we'll take him in with the prisoner an' Geoffrian—if Geoffrian can travel. Mind the prisoner." He departed.

The room was now pervaded with stillness, so that Geoffrian's deep breathing and the quick, skillful movements of Naomi, as she tore bandages from the stuff of Geoffrian's shirt, were sounds sharp and distinct. One of the men had obtained for her a pail of water which was upon the floor beside her, and, as she dipped a cloth in this and drew it up to bathe the wounds she treated, the run and drip of the liquid rattled with startling clearness. No one spoke.

Gunlock, attempting articulation, shattered the stillness with a dreadful sound. Parrot and another went to him and knelt, one on either side of the wounded

man. Gunlock stared into Parrot's face and repeated the dreadful sound. He was lying flat upon his back beneath the erstwhile blanketed window. Parrot, shaken by the transition which had made this first of citizens a fallen criminal, returned Gunlock's stare, dazed. Again the dreadful noise.

"He wants up!" said the deputy.

Together they lifted Gunlock's shoulders to lean them against the wall. The dreadful noise became comprehensible in a groan of bitter anguish. Parrot blanched. "Oh, God!" he said, catching his breath; for the hand he had placed behind Gunlock's shoulders was slippery and red, and where Gunlock had lain was a dark pool.

"Oh, God!" said Parrot. "Oh, Gunlock!"

He seized the blanket and threw it in a heap upon the pool; the other deputy stuffed other bedding beneath Gunlock's shoulders. Gunlock frowned, desiring no ministrations. Dying, he saw the squalid room with the clear vision preceding death. A' ghastly mess, which he had brought about; that he could realize plainly. And it had all been for nothing. This desolation of fire, murder, violence, had been useless, sterile, and for himself it had brought death. Futility was the essence of his tragedy, making this moment bitter.

Across the room he could see Naomi's slim shoulders as she leaned forward over her invalid, with her back to the room and the light of Malcolm's lantern catching the glint in her fluffy brown hair. As he regarded her through a haze of agony, she gave a

little cry and bent low over the cot before her. Geoffrian had returned to consciousness.

"Water!" she cried. "He wants water."

She tried to press Geoffrian back, but he sat up, dropping his feet to the floor. He sat on the side of the cot, devouring her with his eyes. He said nothing. He was dazed.

"You must lie down," she said. She was standing with her arms about his shoulders. "Lie down."

"Yes," said Geoffrian, and he dropped back upon the cot again. Naomi turned toward the other wounded man, but Geoffrian stopped her.

"Don't go away," he said. It seemed as if he thought she was a dream; a figment of his fever.

"There is another wounded man," she told him.

"Wounded?" he cried. "Who is wounded? How has he been wounded?"

"Lie down," she adjured him, and he obeyed her. She crossed to Gunlock, and Malcolm followed her with the lantern and the water. She bent over Gunlock, who gazed upon her, striving to speak. The light was so dim that she could not, fortunately, see She could not discern the gray color of his face. how nearly clay he was. Kneeling beside him, she pulled away his coat and revealed the dark stain upon his shirt which marked the wound. It horrified her, and she knelt, staring at it. Gunlock made a sound; half groan, half growl; and dumbly shook his head. With a great effort he spoke, but his voice was as the noise of water, moving underground. She would have undone his shirt to treat the wound, but he spoke to her. Naomi bent low, trying to hear him, and he formulated phrases, painfully running his words together in gasps.

"It's all up with me now," he mumbled. "I know it's all up with me now." It was not a voice, it was a monotone emerging from the clay of a body nearer death than life. Naomi dropped her head upon her breast and knelt there with her eyes set upon the dark fabric of Gunlock's coat. He struggled further.

"Will you look after my boy?" he brought forth. And then: "You and your man here? His mother's—no woman. . . ." A pause while he gasped deeply. "She's no woman for him." The words trickled out between his teeth; colorless, as his countenance.

Still Naomi did not speak. She knelt with bowed head as though she were weeping silently. She was not weeping, however; she was thinking that this man was her last link with an age that was dead. She had lived for months in a world festering with the evil which had brought this thing about, and she had not suspected it. This big man, pitiful now, had shattered the world for her, and he himself was the last victim of the holocaust. She was silent, knowing that, if she spoke, she would weep for him.

In pain, with agonized effort, he persisted, his voice a wraith; his heart fast failing him.

"I want to know—if you'll forgive . . . and the boy." Another effort. "Look after the boy. . . . You and Geoffrian. . . . "

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"Of course," she said. "It's all right about the boy. . . . And I forgive you, Ralph."

Gunlock saw her disappear in a roar of blessed darkness. He heard the noise of incomprehensible voices receding from him.

"Poor fellow!"

Naomi's voice, infinitely soft; deep with sorrow. It flashed across his mind what might have been, and uncountable visions overwhelmed the thought.

"Poor, poor fellow!"

Millions of miles away she was weeping for him. Somewhere in that blackness . . . and finally, in that blackness, there was peace. . . .

"Poor fellow!" wept Naomi, kneeling at the dead man's side.

And that was the elegy of Gunlock, the big, the dominant; the ruthless; the ambitious.

"Poor fellow!"

CHAPTER XLIV

THE GEOFFRIAN PLACE

After the tragic collapse of Gunlock's structure, there had been some days of convalescence for Geoffrian; and Naomi, living at the Malcolm's, had been his companion. They each cherished a bright picture of the future, which centered upon, and was elaborated from such matters as they had discussed in the vanished age that had brought them together. But they had not talked of those things which they had in their hearts for the sufficient reason that their hearts were too full for talking. They were full of poignant regrets and of the perplexities which troubled other flotsam of Gunlock's turgid sea.

Robert, for instance. Dorothy Gunlock, dramatized by her own imagination into a figure of vast tragedy and infinite pathos, was seriously concerned for her economic future. Thereby Robert gained. He had not felt the depth of the tragedy into which his young life was plunged, despite the tendency of his mother and good Mrs. Malcolm to insist upon it. Only the memory of a night filled with fire and foul villainy disturbed him sometimes in his dreams. For the rest he was inclined to see possibilities in the story of his father's death as one which would single him out in future school days as a boy apart. A boy more

to be pitied than scorned among his fellows. He would enjoy that.

Except for that, however, he did not look forward to future school days. The anticipation of leaving Geoffrian, who was a great hero, to resume companionship in his mother's erratic wandering did not please him. Geoffrian, sitting swathed whitely in Brundage's armchair, had a talk with him about it, and Naomi, remembering her promise to Gunlock, took the matter up with Robert's mother.

In that interview Dorothy made a picture of tortured motherhood and resignation. She was powerless to provide for her boy, whom, it developed, could be properly instructed only in the most exclusive schools. Naomi and Geoffrian then decided that they must take care of the boy, and in that manner the circumstances which had drawn Robert into the northern forests and projected his personality against the edifice of Gunlock's schemes brought from the hearts of these two the future which they cherished for each other.

"You must leave the police," Naomi set forth as the corner stone of her desire.

"November fifteenth," he said. "That is how I had arranged it. I shall then have finished a year's service, and will have seventeen hundred dollars and sixteen cents over after buying my release."

"Then we shall move out to our clearing," postulated the lady.

"A home," he said. "But I must build one for ourselves with my own two hands." "That's as you like." Her plan had nothing whatever to do with a home built with his two hands, but it would do him no harm to indulge the idea. She was the heiress of Ruggles' acres, and she would give them entirely over to his keeping. "In that way," she explained, "we can afford to be Robert's guardians."

"What a manager she is," he said.

Geoffrian went down to Prince Albert with the stricken Dorothy and her cherished son, legal matters were there arranged, and Robert was packed off with his mother to await Geoffrian's coming to New York. Mr. and Mrs. Geoffrian made that journey together in the autumn and arranged for the boy's schooling as a trifling detail in a realization of complete felicity.

Robert came up to the woods again when the summer returned to the clearings, and he brought a school-mate with him. The two boys rambled and rode through the forest, bringing new sounds and fearsome to glades where other animals, afrighted, fled from them. Returning to the Geoffrian place in the evenings, they would ferret Geoffrian out from store or barn, or from the woodland lumber mill where he gathered raw material for the home he was to build.

"Time to knock off!" they would cry.

If it wasn't, he would put them to work. If it was, he joined them in a descent upon the erstwhile Ruggles' house where his hearth and home now lay. 'After dinner, four would emerge from that log home where three had entered, to ride in the forest together.

One evening the ride took them through devious trails to a hilltop, and the four riders sat there, subdued by the panorama of lordly forest and serene waters in the afterglow.

The boys, ecstatic, chattered blithely, descrying land-marks.

"That's old McKeaghs winter camp!" cried Robert.
"The cabin way off on the bend of the river." He waggled a grimy hand.

"Sure!" agreed the other, "where you caught the black weasel."

"Aw!" frowned Robert.

"And it was a skunk!" insisted the other. They pressed their ponies to the brow of the hill.

Naomi and Geoffrian, behind them, gazed upon the familiar scene. They often came to this hilltop, and when they came there was a certain ritual wherewith she teased him.

"Do you remember how you spoke to me that afternoon?" she asked, her hazel eyes a-twinkle. "You have never spoken like that again."

"One never does," he said.

"Look!" cried a boy. "That copse of fir trees. That's on the river trail, isn't it?"

Geoffrian looked at the far-off landmark.

"Yes; but it's a long way off. Fifteen minutes ride."

"Bet I can do it in ten!" cried Robert.

"Bet you can't!" answered Geoffrian.

"Bet I can beat you!" chimed the schoolmate.

"All right! I betcha!" and Robert's pony shot

forth for the descending trail, followed close by the schoolmate's mount.

"Ware the trees!" called Geoffrian, and he was alone with Naomi.

They dismounted, and she sat on a mossy bank; pedestal for a fast decaying stump, fern filled.

"They've gone to find the River Trail," he said.

"I suppose it is the proper trail for youth to follow. It brought me home, you know."

"Yes, it leads into the forest; and the forest holds adventure. It is stronger than we are, and it goes on forever, living," she frowned. "And dying," she added.

They heard the shouts of the boys. Golden voices, far off.

"Your father has gone since we stood here that first afternoon," he said, "and Gunlock."

"That's what I mean. The forest reminds us of that."

"And it reminds us of life, as well. When we stood here before, the fate of your father and of Gunlock was prepared. But at the same time you and I came together. Here on this hilltop. . . . Gunlock is dead, but there is Robert's voice. Your father is dead, but you are here."

He paused and they heard the shouts of the boys in the evening stillness. He folded her in his arms.

"Oh, my heart!" she murmured. "My life!" The smell of illimitable life filled their nostrils,

THE RIVER TRAIL

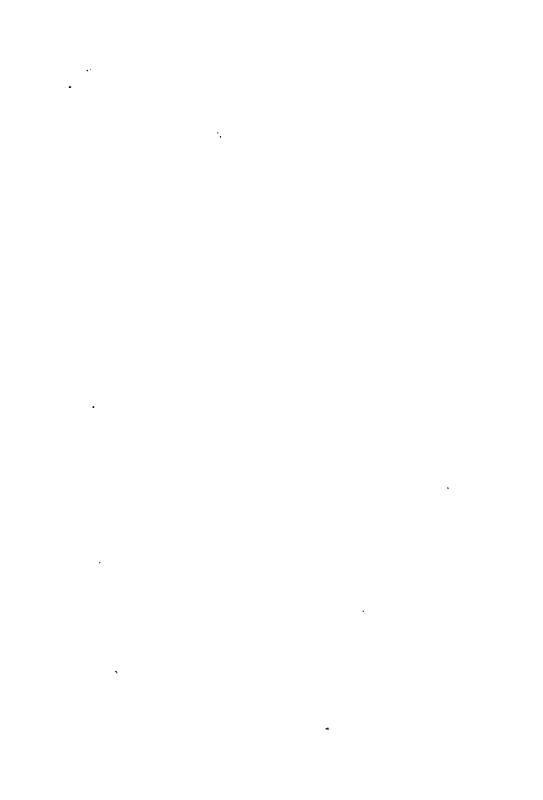
and the fading daylight cast a soft curtain over the wide spaces. The spell of the forest entered their hearts with its rewards of consolation and contentment. At a far distance the afterglow picked out with flame the copse of firs that marked the River Trail.

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THE END







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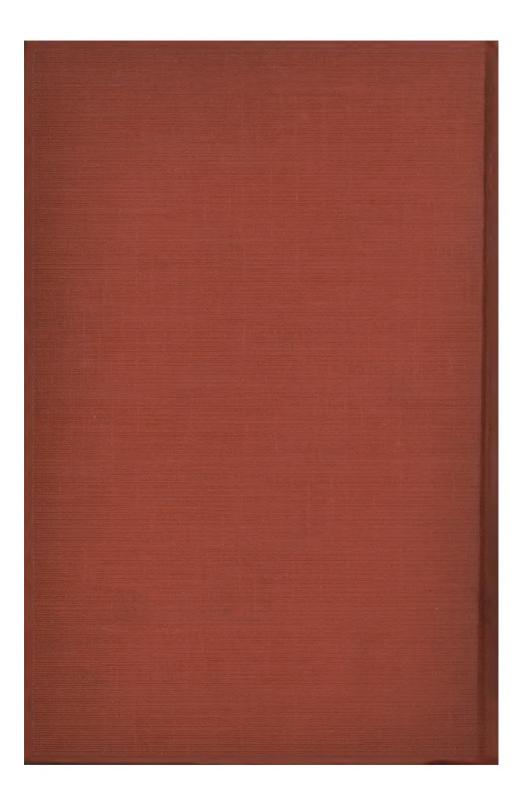
LAURIE YORK ERSKINE



Laurie York Erskine is the son of Wallace Erskine, an English actor. He was born in England, June 23rd, 1894, simultaneously with the Prince of Wales. Having been imported to the United States at the age of 7 years, he was educated in the New York Public Schools and the Choir School of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Desiring to write, but reluctant to starve in an attic, he endeavored to solve a persistent economic problem in the successive roles of lawyer's clerk, shipping clerk (in an oil house on Front Street; very greasy), actor (he was Alaric in Peg o' My Heart), wanderer in the West, wanderer in the Southwest, wanderer in the North, wanderer in the Northwest, bond salesman, warrior, and again as bond salesman. During the war he flew with the scouts and the bombers of the British Royal Flying Corps.

While selling bonds in Detroit he submitted the manuscript of "Renfrew of the Royal Mounted" to a magazine which bought it immediately for publication and Mr. Erskine immediately became an author. He has lived happily ever after.

D. Appleton and Company
New York
London



RENFREW of the ROYAL MOUNTED

By LAURIE YORK ERSKINE

"You know I can't tell you fellows of what the North in wintertime is like. I can't tell you of the feeling which grips a man's heart and tells him to hold back, as he stands facing the ghostly barrens which stretch far and away to the horizon. That leaden horizon has concealed death in agony, blindness, and raving lunacy for many men who have plunged into it. The gray horizon of the North in wintertime hides a pretty bitter sort of life, and a very rotten, lonely death—if a man fails."

"If a man fails!" But if he wins out . . . ? Laurie York Erskine knows the lonely Northwest and he knows its men who succeed and who fail. In "Renfrew of the Royal Mounted" he has written a wonderful story of the adventures of those gallant men, the Canadian Northwest Royal Mounted Police. The central character is a member of that picturesque organization, who has lived to the utmost and who recounts amazing episodes showing brave deeds in the Northern wilderness. The reader will thrill to what he tells of Indian uprisings, of frontier ruffians, of men maddened among the perils of the lonely land, of vast snow and ice blizzards, of the true friendship, the humanity, the quiet courage of the Police. It is a book filled with the vigor of the rude North, the inspiration of true bravery.

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